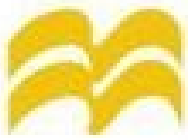
HIDING MAN

TRACY DAUGHERTY



HIDING MAN

ALSO BY TRACY DAUGHERTY

FICTION

Late in the Standoff
Axeman's Jazz
It Takes a Worried Man
The Boy Orator
The Woman in the Oil Field
What Falls Away
Desire Provoked

NONFICTION

Five Shades of Shadow

HIDING MAN

A BIOGRAPHY OF DONALD BARTHELME

TRACY DAUGHERTY

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For my mother, my father, and my sister

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Try to be a man about whom nothing is known.

—Donald Barthelme, *Snow White*

I loved idiot paintings, tops of doors, decors, saltimbanques, canvases, signboards, popul engravings, obsolete literature, church Latin, badly-spelled pornographic works, novels by o grandmothers, fairy tales, little children's books, old operas, folk refrains, popular rhythms.

—Rimbaud, "A Season in Hell"

. . . the author . . . historically died of a mortal disease but poetically died of longing for eternity.

—Kierkegaard, *The Point of View for My Work as an Author*

INTRODUCTION

THE LOST TEACHE

The assignment was simple: Find a copy of John Ashbery's *Three Poems*, read it, buy a bottle of win go home, sit in front of the typewriter, drink the wine, don't sleep, and produce, by dawn, twelve pag of Ashbery imitation.

A dutiful student, I walked to the Brazos Bookstore, a few blocks from my apartment, ar purchased a paperback edition of the book (nobody walks in Houston, so this was more dutiful than sounds). Next I made my way to Weingarten's to pick up a bottle of red. I didn't drink much, ar didn't know one wine from another. Then I went home.

I lived in an efficiency apartment in a slightly fixed-up, but not fixed up enough, old building near freeway underpass southwest of downtown. Always, when I unlocked my door, I was greeted by lou scurrying. The bugs were so big, I felt sure I'd return someday to find them pulling books from m shelves, rearranging the space more to their liking. The apartment was close to where my teacher live when he was a young man, writing and publishing his first short stories. I didn't know this then, and I had, it would have made me more self-conscious than I already was about my work.

Thus the assignment. I was in my first year of a Ph.D. program, but really I was just stalling f time while trying to write a novel. My fellow students, talented and confident, intimidated m Determined to meet their standards and to perform perfectly, I wasn't performing at all. I edited in m head long before my hands scooched near a keyboard. My pages remained pristinely, sadly blank.

My teacher's solution: Ashbery, sleeplessness, and alcohol. He didn't tell me I needed to loosen u but we both knew that this was the case. I fed the stray cats in the weeds behind my building so the wouldn't mew all night, then settled at the card table where I ate and tried to write each evening. switched on my Smith Corona electric typewriter. This was in the days before Microsoft Word o WordPerfect. The only mouse in my place had four legs and a tail. I opened the book:

> At this time of life whatever being there is is doing a lot of listening as though to the feeling of the wind before it starts. . . .

What the hell was this? I rubbed my neck and tried again:

> From the outset it was apparent that someone had played a colossa trick on something.

A colossal trick. Right. Well, my task was not to analyze or understand *Three Poems*, but to respon to its rhythms, take its music into my body, and come up with a similar score. I finished reading, on half-concentrating. My front window was busted, and mosquitoes invited themselves in and out of th room. I had tried covering the window with a sheet, but the sheet flapped raggedly in a breeze. Th night before, my upstairs neighbor, another student, had shattered the pane by trying to climb the wal

He had come home drunk around midnight and discovered that he'd lost his key, so he shimmied u the ~~rainspout to reach his window. He slipped. His foot crashed through my glass, startling me a~~wake

I fiddled with the sheet. Through the window I glimpsed a streetwalker standing beside a light po on the corner. She wore a long blue dress and flicked a Bic lighter off and on. The vice squad ha chased hookers from one end of my neighborhood to another. Soon, the women would be driven fro my street, too, but for now their presence charged the block with an undercurrent of danger a morbid titillation.

This was my life in Houston, in the grad-student boondocks of the area known as Montrose. I ha come here because I wanted to be a writer.

And now, because I wanted to be a writer, I was stuck with Ashbery. I started to open the wine an realized I didn't own a corkscrew. Another walk to the store, keeping my head down as I passed th hooker. "Evening, sugar," she said. I nodded and sped up. Back in my apartment, I poured a little wi into a Dixie cup. I sat down and started to type.

By one o'clock, my flesh had served as an all-you-can-eat smorgasbord for the mosquitoes. I w bleary, yawning, and tipsy. A third of the bottle remained. My shirtsleeves sagged with sweat. I ha filled four pages with abstract nonsense. I poured more wine and hit the keyboard again. "All fall, m father held a trouble light beneath the car," I wrote. "My family was not on the move."

Two more hours passed. Just after 3:00 A.M., the phone rang. I jumped, tipping the cup. Someone dead, I thought. A car crash, a stroke. I picked up.

"How's it coming?" said Donald Barthelme.

"Fine," I croaked. "I think."

"Good. Twelve pages, on my desk. In five hours." He clicked off.

Fast-forward twenty years, to the early winter of 2001. I'm attending the "Andy Warho Photography" exhibit at the International Center of Photography in Manhattan. The show displa many of Warhol's photo-booth portraits of writers, artists, and celebrities from the 1960s, including picture entitled *Man with Newspaper: He Is a She, ca. 1963*, featuring a shorthaired man in bla glasses reading a tabloid. The tabloid's front-page headline, all about a sex-change operation, says HE IS A SHE! The photograph's interest lies in the contrast between the cheesy newspaper and the man impeccable appearance. He's well groomed and cleanly shaved, in a dark suit and fashionably thin ti He peruses the paper with raised eyebrows and a tight mouth, just this side of shocked, just this clo to lasciviousness—campy, funny, an assured performance. The picture is rare in the Warhol collectio in that its subject is not identified by name.

I recognize the man as the late Donald Barthelme, whose short stories, appearing regularly in *Th New Yorker* and in ten books between 1964 and 1987, along with his four novels, substantial expanded the range of American fiction for those who were paying attention. In the 1960s, the who culture, it seemed, paid heed—absurdities and social disruptions appeared to leap off his page weekly, and into the streets of our cities. His *New Yorker* pieces read like dispatches from the fro lines. He had "managed to place himself in the center of modern consciousness," William Gass wrot Barthelme knockoffs glutted the lit mags, and he even had to disown a few stories, penned by a can imposter, that popped up in various publications. He wasn't just influencing other writers; apparentl his mischievous spirit inhabited some of them.

In the late 1970s, his influence waned. The nation's psychedelic fiesta wound down and the cultu sobered up (or so goes the official line). Straightforward narrative storytelling reasserted its grip o American literature, buttressed by the reverence surrounding Raymond Carver and other ne "realists." Following Don's death from throat cancer in 1989, his books, with few exceptions, drifte

out of print and out of reach—a situation that has only recently begun to change as Dave Egger ~~Donald Antrim, George Saunders, and other prominent young writers now claim Don as an influenc~~ on their work. For a while, Amazon's Web site noted the "unfortunate discontinuance" of many o Don's titles.

Asked, once, about critics' responses to his work, he replied, "Oh, I think they want me to go awa and stop doing what I'm doing."

"Neglect is useful," he mused in 1960, before fully launching his literary career. One of ou "traditional obligations in our role as the public [is] the obligation to neglect artists, writers, creato of every kind." In this way, he said, a "Starving Opposition is created, and the possibility of criticis of our culture is provided for." As far as he could see, at that time, neglect was "proceeding appropriate levels."

Since the 1960s, neglect has become a growth industry, merging with historical revisionism to wip out the competition—that is, anything that doesn't hew to the official line. For the past three decade most of the quality fiction published in the United States has been doggedly representationa respectful of a narrow literary and cultural tradition, as though all Americans agree on what valuable, what's true; as though the social upheavals of the fifties, sixties, and seventies—Vietnam the sexual revolution, the civil rights and women's movements, the proliferation of nuclear arms- never happened; as though certain imaginative responses to these events—in abstract art and Pop Ar the Berkeley Free Speech Movement, the 1967 attempt to "exorcise" the Pentagon, the protests May 1968 in Paris, and fiction that questioned all authority, including that of language—nev happened.

They happened. Straightforward narrative storytelling is only one way to measure the results these seismic shifts, but you wouldn't know that, poking through most bookstores.

Neglect is useful if we are mindful of why and how it occurs—thus the possibility for a cultur critique. In part, Don's "unfortunate discontinuance" was a result of officialdom's widespread desi to bury the troubled 1960s. Also, with the exception of a few, he has suffered at the hands of younge writers, many of whom see him as dated as "groovy," "make love not war," and the rest of hipp lingo. Others dismiss him as a writer who wrote only about writing, a troublemaker like Marc Duchamp scribbling a mustache on a print of the *Mona Lisa*—a perpetual adolescent gleeful trashing classical art.

In fact, Don stressed that he didn't like fiction about fiction. And though the specific events th chiseled his sensibility have passed, he was right, I think, to insist that the "problems" they pointed —among them, the need to refresh language continually, to keep it free of "political and soci contamination," safe from co-optation by commercial interests—are "durable ones."

One of authority's tools in creating a Book of Neglect is to suggest that opposition to domina cultural currents occurs only in moments of extreme crisis, when society is strained—world wars, t Great Depression, the 1960s. A signal value in reconsidering the life and work of Donald Barthelm now is seeing that opposition is *built into* the dominant culture: It has always carried the seeds of i own unraveling. Like a plant that blooms only every few decades, oppositional art erupts into the op now and then, as it did in the 1960s; while its flowering may seem an isolated event, if we trace i roots, we realize its perennial nature.

In 1990, Lois Zamora, one of Don's Houston colleagues, wrote that the relationship of his fictio "to political writing needs critical repositioning. As time passes, and 'postmodernism' and oth current ideologies come increasingly into focus, we will identify and appreciate ambiguities in h work that have as yet been barely noticed or discussed by the critics." The time has come for th "critical repositioning."

Just ~~before his fatal illness, Don said he believed that the latest generation of American writer~~s he
"lowered expectations in terms of life. My generation, perhaps foolishly, expected, even demande
that life be wonderful and magical and then tried to make it so by writing in a rather complex way.
seems now quite an eccentric demand."

In the mid-1980s, he would sit in his Houston duplex, across the street from the Edgar Allan Po
Elementary School, and tell me he had "done his little thing" in fiction. His moment had passed. Th
"postmodern" writing with which he'd been linked had been forced to retreat into a sma
arrondissement in the American literary landscape, surrounded by General Carver and his troops.
writing classes, Don quoted his old philosophy teacher, Maurice Natanson: "It is a mistake to regar
literature as a graveyard of dead systems." Privately, he didn't sound so sure.

Years have passed, now, since I listened to his rueful talk, and gradually I've come to see it's wron
to think of Don as a *victim* of neglect. He was, rather, a *connoisseur* of it. Often, his stories are built o
obscure foundations. Just as often, they celebrate the long lost, the hopeless, the never was. Like th
lonely clowns beating their drums on empty streets in the late lithographs of Daumier (one of Don
heroes) or Baudelaire's "pitiful" acrobats "illumined" in the shadows of alleys "by burned-dow
candles, dripping and smoking," Don's characters proceed by marginal means.

In other words, I believe he *designed* his stories—and his teaching—to fall into dormancy, only
bloom again unexpectedly. His personal anguish bumped up against his awareness that he was chasin
the impossible, and his choice to pursue an aesthetics of uncertainty—what he called "needf
obscurity." "Art is not difficult because it wishes to be difficult," he said, "but because it wishes to b
art."

One of Don's men in the shadows laments, "The point of my career is perhaps how little I achieve
We speak of someone as having had a 'long career' and that's usually taken to be admiring, but wha
if it's thirty-five years of persistence in error? I don't know what value to place on what I've don
perhaps none at all is right." This melancholy was not new in Don's work. From the beginning, *failu*
is a primary theme of his fiction. "[W]hat an artist does is fail," he writes. "The actualization fails
meet, equal, the intuition . . . there is no such thing as a 'successful artist.' "

By the late eighties, this concern seemed intensely personal in Don's writing—as it did
Daumier's last efforts—and burdened even his lightest sentences. His gestures carried the weight
all this, too. His walk was a shamble. His shoulders drooped. Frequently, he blotted sweat from h
forehead with the back of his sleeve.

One afternoon, I arrived at his university office for an appointment. He sat at his desk with a cop
of his latest collection, *Overnight to Many Distant Cities*, which had just been published. He picked u
the book and balanced it on the tips of his fingers. "Looks a little slender, don't you think?" he aske
me. Then he shrugged, the profoundest, weariest shrug I had ever seen. It seemed to take about
minute.

On the morning I was to turn in my Ashbery assignment, I was dragging from exhaustion and
hangover. He looked as bad as I felt. I decided to drop the assignment on his desk and leave him alon
but he told me to sit down. He skimmed my first few pages, chuckled the way I'd heard him laug
over a jazz riff whenever he'd put on a record in his home. He grinned at me. "Congratulations,"
said. "Now you can get some rest."

"It's junk," I said.

"It's an imitation. It's *supposed* to be junk."

"But what's the point? I can't do anything with it."

“What do you think you’ve achieved?”

“~~I don’t know. That’s what I mean,” I said. “I didn’t understand a word of the Ashbery. I~~ don understand a word of what *I’ve* written.”

“In that case,” he said, “you’ve just composed your first important draft.”

It took me weeks, months to understand that Don didn’t mean writing should make no sense. He mea it shouldn’t be so overdetermined, it falls dead on the page. The process requires a pinch uncertainty so the energy of discovery can be built into the work.

The “irruption of accident” can produce “estimable results,” Don wrote. And: “What is magic [about art] is that it at once invites and resists interpretation . . . it remains, after interpretation, vital- no interpretation or cardiopulmonary push-pull can exhaust or empty it.”

Don’s teaching had this quality. At the university, grad students used to fret about their future between classes, in a musty lounge on the second floor of the English Department building. Here, Do dropped a few of his pedagogical hints, like scattering bread among the hungry and lost. The scho gave him a discretionary fund to spend on the creative writing program. Often, he aided struggli students with their personal expenses. And he furnished the lounge with texts. I had the impressio that, given more money, he would have hung a sign above the door—CABARET VOLTAIRE—decked t place out with French paintings, and hired starving poets to crawl around the lounge shouti “Umbah-umbah!” in healthy Dadaist fashion for our entertainment and edification.

A tossed-off remark, a question in passing, a note in the margins of a story, a book he offer . . . we’d feel his little prods now and then, the merest touch, with no context or follow-up. B later—who knows why—they’d suddenly make enormous sense. He was planting seeds in his studen that might not grow for years. In the two decades since the night I cribbed *Three Poems* and the day discovered Don in the Warhol exhibit, I’d startled dozens of times at the unexpected movement these new/old kernels in my mind.

And his stories: Silently now, as title after title is suspended, rescued, suspended again, they wait be rediscovered. That they wait without much expectation is one of the most beautiful and melancho aspects of his art.

After Don died, his colleague Phillip Lopate wrote of him, “It [is not] easy to conjure up a man wh for all his commanding presence, had something of the ghost about him even in his lifetime.”

Don once dismissed the possibility that his biography would clarify his stories and novels. In a 198 *Paris Review* interview with J. D. O’Hara, he said, “There’s not a strong autobiographical strain in m fiction. A few bits of fact here and there . . . which illuminate . . . not very much.” As with his storie he rigorously edited the interview, cutting much of the biographical content so only a smidge remains on the page. In the raw transcript of his conversations with O’ Hara, he said, “I will nev write an autobiography, or possibly I’ve already done so, in the stories,” thereby suggesting a strong personal strain in the fiction than he was willing to admit publicly. And though he insisted that his li story would not “sustain a person’s attention for a moment,” his main objection to a literary biograph was this: It would indicate “your life is over, a thing that might make a boy a shade selfconscious.” like to think he wouldn’t mind, so much, this book’s appearance now. He admitted to O’Hara th “biography is always interesting. Even the Beckett biography [by Deidre Bair], which is not ve good, is fascinating.” He also said that his work had “not perhaps [been] adequately” comment upon; this is the “kind of thing that comes with time.”

On another occasion, he said, “Time works on fiction as it does on us.” And time is pitiless-

another reason for telling this story now. “I remember Donald well . . . or as well as I rememb anything these days,” said Roger Angell, the venerable *New Yorker* editor, when he and I chatted abo Don. “I’m patchy, I mean.” Kirk Sale, Don’s downstairs neighbor for nearly twenty years, kept tellin me his memory was lousy, but he urged me to prod him, because, he said, “I don’t mind trying” remember Don. He even sent me a little poem:

> *When I reflect how many cells*
> *Remain in what my brain’s become*,
> *I take my comfort from the thought*,
> Cogito, ergo *some*.

George Christian, with whom Don began to write as a professional journalist, would have had muc to say about Don’s early career. Christian died a few years ago from Parkinson’s disease. Time ha worked on Don’s fiction, and it has worked on those who knew him. It’s necessary to gather what w can *while* we can.

Finally, it comes down to this: I still want to know Don better so as to know better the world *h* knew. Though some of the details have changed over time, the world he knew is, of course, our worl He still has lessons to teach us.

PART ONE

BAUDELAIRE AND BEYOND

1

TOOLS

The America that Don knew as a boy and as a teenager, in the 1930s and 1940s, was a nation whos structures were beginning to be formed with messianic fervor. Or so his father believed. His fathe Donald Barthelme, was born in Galveston, Texas, in 1907, the son of a lumber dealer. He learne early, to calculate board feet, negotiate timber rights, and distinguish loblolly from other sorts of pi trees. These skills led him to a pragmatic view of building and of problem solving in general, a vie his eldest son would inherit.

During the elder Barthelme's childhood, Galveston was dominated by singular personalities wh left indelible imprints on the city's finances, institutions, environment, and cultural life. Willia Lewis Moody, Jr., the son of a cotton magnate, owned controlling interest in the city's national ban in 1923, he purchased the *Galveston News*, Texas's oldest continuously running newspaper; in 192 he formed the National Hotel Corporation, and subsequently built two of the city's landmark inns; h organized what became the biggest insurance company in Texas, and bought a printing outfit a several ranches, though he had little interest in raising cattle. He used the land for duck hunting a fishing. A Gulf Coast Citizen Kane, he managed the city's money and information, and shaped muc of the public space. In 1974, Don would publish a story called "I Bought a Little City" about a Mood like man who, otherwise bored with his life, establishes an amiable but unimaginative empire Galveston, and presides over the city's decline.

The other major figure in town, prior to World War I, was N. J. Clayton, a supremely confide architect with a love of high Victorian style. Even today, the generous loft spaces in many Galveston's commercial buildings bear his mark. He favored bold massing and articulate compositio and was fond of Gothic detail. That one man's sensibility, if pushed aggressively, could fashion city's looks was a lesson absorbed, and cherished, by Barthelme senior. It was an example of idealis optimism, and hard work that he impressed on his children.

Always short for his age, with red hair, fair skin, and fat glasses from the time he was three, t elder Barthelme felt as a boy that if he was going to get anywhere in life, he "wasn't going to be ab to just stand there." "I had to walk into a room with a swagger, and talk loud, and tell 'em I w there," he said. In their memoir, *Double Down*, his sons Rick and Steve said that, early on, their fath adopted the attitude, perhaps modeled on men like Moody, that the "world was a place that neede fixing and he was just the man to fix it."

By the time he reached high school, he was an assured and popular young man, always tweaki authority to win his friends' loyalty, practiced at the swagger he'd affected, a hell-raiser.

As a college freshman, he enrolled in the Rice Institute, in Houston, but was asked to leave "f some indiscretion in the school newspaper, which he edited," Rick and Steve recounted, "a indiscretion that wasn't his, as it turned out, but some fellow student's for whom Father was taking t fall."

The elder Barthelme's father approached school administrators on his behalf but found the unbending. Instead of waiting twelve months to reenroll, when his suspension would expi Barthelme transferred to the University of Pennsylvania. There, he studied architecture with Pa Philippe Cret, and he met Helen Bechtold, whom he would marry in June 1930. They were introduc on a blind date when he went with a buddy to Helen's sorority house. As Helen and a frie approached the boys in the house's foyer, Helen whispered that she hoped she would get the "ta dark, and handsome one." Instead, her date was the "short, red-headed one."

“He was a fortunate man,” Rick and Steve wrote in *Double Down*. “[Mother was] a prize that too ~~some winning, according to the family lore, for while Mother was smart, talented, stylish, attractiv~~ and sought after, our father was only smart and talented.” Away from school, Helen lived i Philadelphia with her mother and sister. Her father had died when she was twelve, leaving his famil financially secure, but Helen wanted a teaching career and even made what she once described as a “abortive attempt” at writing. She was interested in acting at the time she met Barthelme.

On April 7, 1931, Don was born (he would later write, “What else happened in 1931? . . . Creatio of countless surrealist objects”). In December of 1932, his sister, Joan, arrived. Helen Bechtol Barthelme abandoned her teaching, writing, and acting dreams; she hunkered down to become th “beloved mother” of a family that would eventually total five children, all of whom, swayed by the mother’s love of reading and drama, excelled at writing.

After graduating from Penn, Donald Barthelme, Sr., worked as a draftsman for Cret and for the firm of Zantzinger, Borie, & Medary (where he helped design the U.S. Department of Justice building i Washington, D.C.), but he was unable to find lasting work in Philadelphia. In 1932—just before Joa was born—the family moved to Galveston, where Barthelme joined his father’s lumber business. Th company was best known for building a magnificent roller coaster near the seawall at the beac Barthelme’s father, Fred, a New York transplant, was a prominent and successful member o Galveston society.

Barthelme was restless working for the old man and living in a garage apartment behind h parents’ house. He worked briefly for the Dallas architect Roscoe DeWitt, then, in 1937, moved h family to Houston, where he joined the firm of John F. Staub. In 1940, he branched out on his own.

At Penn, his course of study had stressed traditional architecture and conventional buildin techniques. On his own, he studied the Bauhaus movement in Europe and pored over Frank Lloy Wright’s published plans; still, he didn’t chafe against Penn’s established pedagogy. He admitted hi perplexity at the Philadelphia Savings Fund Society building, designed by Howe and Lescaze—th was one of most prominent modern buildings erected in the United States in the 1930s, and Bartheln didn’t *get* its austerity.

In Philadelphia, he encountered, once more, powerful personalities. In class one day, evaluating on of Barthelme’s designs, Cret asked, “Where did you get this idea?” “Oh,” Barthelme said, “I got it o of my head, Mr. Cret.” “It’s good that it is out,” his teacher replied. Temporarily, Barthelme worke for Cret in a Philadelphia firm that employed Louis Kahn. At night, Kahn would go around the offic and leave critiques on his coworkers’ designs, including those of his bosses. People “laughed at him Barthelme said. “But he was teaching himself.”

Little by little, Barthelme taught himself modern architecture. He would pass his enthusiasm f learning on to Don. Though Don’s chosen pursuit would differ from his father’s, the idea of *th modern* and the aesthetic principles of modern architecture form the background of Don’s writing. broad familiarity with what was at stake in his father’s world is essential to understanding wh mattered to Don in his work.

Paul Philippe Cret, Barthelme’s mentor at Penn, accepted a teaching position at the university 1903, which he held until his retirement in 1937. He studied at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts in Paris, on of Europe’s oldest centers of art and architectural education, dating back in various forms to 167 The Beaux-Arts basic design principles stressed symmetry, simple volumes, and lucid progressio through a series of exterior and interior spaces; the outside was a rational extension of the insid Beaux-Arts urbanism relied on visual axes with clearly marked meeting points as its prime orderin device; its most celebrated examples were Georges-Eugène Haussmann’s schemes for th reorganization of Paris in the mid-nineteenth century. The Beaux-Arts approach was not seriousl challenged in American academia until the late 1930s, when a second wave of Europeans came to th

States, who were advocates of the International Style, and assumed positions of power.

~~As Cret's career progressed, he absorbed elements of the International Style and began a process~~ o simplification, minimizing the ornamentation of his designs. He reduced the number of molding which served to highlight the planar and volumetric quality of his work. Many of his earlier design such as the one for the Indianapolis Library, used Doric colonnades. By the early thirties, when h conceived the Folger Shakespeare Library in Washington, D.C., he had replaced the colonnades wit abstract fluted piers.

At a time when university architecture departments felt the first ripples of a change, when, mo than ever, competing ideologies dominated the field, Barthelme was excited to find a man like Cre who bridged the gap between tradition and innovation. Cret was not bullying or domineering, but h was unflappable and firm. These qualities enabled him to perform the architect's trickiest tas smoothly: appeasing prickly clients and warring constituencies. He could "cut through" the politic bad histories, "complexities and ambiguities" of a situation, wrote Elizabeth Greenwell Grossma and "offer a design that seemed by its simplicity to reveal the immediate character of [an] institution

Initially, Barthelme followed this example to good effect, but calm, compromise, and diplomac were not attributes he could sustain. Eventually, he would topple into the "excesses" of his professio the "heroics and mockheroics" exhibited by architects in general, as Don later reflected.

What came to be called the International Style of modern architecture, in the years between the fir and second world wars, valued lightweight materials, open interior spaces, smooth machineli surfaces, and exposed structural components, airily clad in collaged metal sheeting or glass curta walls. It was a craft test-driven in the Bauhaus workshops in Germany in the 1920s under the directio of Walter Gropius, who championed austerity and performance in the steel windows and door frame of the houses he designed, in exposed metal radiators, exposed electric lightbulbs, and element furniture. He believed that materials and forms should be celebrated for their independen asymmetrical structures, rather than for their compatibility and relative invisibility in an overa design.

In the Bauhaus vision, all the arts joined to shape a splendid future. "Together let us conceive an create the new building . . . which will embrace architecture and sculpture and painting . . . and whic will rise one day toward heaven from the hands of a million workers like the crystal symbol of a ne faith," said the group's 1919 proclamation. Beneath the document's socialist zeal, one can still hea the trauma of war, and an uncertainty about whether any social order can survive the erosions of tim and the violence of men.

The Parisian architect Le Corbusier expanded the Bauhaus model, promoting "house machines "healthy (and morally so too) and beautiful," he said, "in the same way that the working tools an instruments which accompany our existence are beautiful." Mies van der Rohe, who began his care in Berlin, expounded a skin and bones architecture in the office buildings he designed. "The maximu effect with the minimum expenditure of means," his projects proclaimed.

The schools of modern architecture were not uniform, nor were their practitioners always agreement, but the field's leading figures shared a belief that architecture should boldly reflect i time. Convictions about the character of the time conflicted wildly, but this did not blunt the energ with which Gropius, Le Corbusier, Mies, and others set out to convert the world to their aesthet aims. They were on a crusade. As large-scale turmoil scarred Europe more and more in the first half the century, the tenor of the time, and appropriate responses to it, became harder to parse. One cou argue that the only sane response to the Holocaust was emptiness and silence—not to build at all. B Europe's upheavals had another effect: the flow of brilliant architects to the safety and relativ

openness of the United States, which Le Corbusier called the “country of timid people.”

If ~~U.S. institutions were slow to accept the new architecture, young architects in the nation’s~~ fine programs, schools, and firms were not at all timid about embracing change. A “tendency towar Oedipal overthrow” has always been “rampant in [the] profession,” says the architecture critic Herbe Muschamp. To survive, one must cultivate a strong personality.

During this pivotal migration of genius, Donald Barthelme, Sr., started his practice. Sinc childhood, he had worked to overcome timidity, to prove himself by staking out fresh directions. Lat in life, he recalled meeting, early in his career, Mies van der Rohe, and criticizing one of the master buildings for its lack of human scale. “Mr. Barthelme, I find that I can make things beautiful, and th is enough for me,” Mies replied.

• • •

Barthelme’s first major projects straddled the battle zone between the future and the past. Zantzinge Borie, & Medary’s design for the U.S. Department of Justice building, which Barthelme had a say (though, as a junior member of the team, not a very large one), combined classical style with Art Dec detailing and an unusual use of aluminum for features commonly cast in bronze, such as interior sta railings, grilles, and door trim.

After his return to Texas, Barthelme inherited a project begun by Frank Lloyd Wright, which struc an early modernist blow in Dallas. The entrepreneur Stanley Marcus had commissioned Wright build a house on six and a half acres of north Texas prairie. Marcus recalled:

> We had told Mr. Wright that we could only afford to spend $25,000 which was a lot of money in the Depression year of 1934, but whic he assured us was quite feasible. We invited him to come t Dallas. . . . He arrived on January 1, with the temperature at seven degrees. He concluded that this was typical winter weather for Dalla and nothing we could tell him about the normal January ice storm could ever convince him that we didn’t live in a perpetually balm climate. When his first preliminary sketches arrived, we noticed tha there were no bedrooms, just cubicles in which to sleep when th weather was inclement. Otherwise, ninety percent of the time w would sleep outdoors on the deck. We protested that solution on th grounds that I was subject to colds and sinus trouble. He dismisse this objection in his typical manner, as though brushing a bit of lin from his jacket. . . .

Additionally, Wright provided “little or no closet space, commenting that closets were only usef for accumulating things you didn’t need.” Frustrated, Marcus enlisted Roscoe DeWitt to serve as

local associate for Wright, who had returned to Taliesin, and to be an on-the-ground interpreter o
~~Wright's plans. Marcus clashed again with the great man when he asked DeWitt to be on guard~~ again
inadequate flashing specifications—Wright's buildings were notoriously leak-prone, but he deepl
resented this precaution.

Bad feelings got worse, cost estimates spiraled, and, eventually, Marcus turned everything over t
DeWitt and his young designer, Donald Barthelme. "I couldn't understand [Wright's] plans,
Barthelme said. "He had a column that was in the shape of a star, and he had marked a little note th
said, 'stock column.' So far as I knew there was no such stock column. He also had six panes of gla
about six feet wide each that were slipped into adjacent tracks with no frame around the end. I can ju
imagine trying to slide those doors open."

Ultimately, the house, completed in 1937, bore no resemblance to Wright's initial desig
Barthelme designed a long, low-lying structure with cross-ventilation and open living and dinin
rooms. Pronounced overhangs sheltered the windows. The result was too conventional to be a notab
piece of architecture, Marcus said later, though it was unconventional enough to be "high
controversial" in Dallas at the time. "It proved to be a home which met our living requirements bett
than the Wright house would have done."

That same year, for the Texas centennial celebration in Dallas's Fair Park, Barthelme designed th
Hall of State, which remains among the most monumental structures in Texas, and was then, at $1
million, the most expensive building per square foot ever constructed in the state. Originally,
consortium of ten Dallas firms had been hired to create the hall, but they failed to produce a pla
acceptable to the State Board of Control. Barthelme synthesized their ideas and added his own. Face
with Texas limestone, with bronze doors and blue tile (the color of the bluebonnet, Texas's stat
flower), the building is an inverted T—a structure in which Paul Cret's influence is apparent.

Barthelme assembled a team of regional, national, and international artists to add Art Deco touche
to the Hall of State. He conceived a symbolic seal of Texas to hang above the entrance, depicting
female figure, the "Lady of Texas," gripping a shield and the state flag. Beside her, an ow
representing wisdom, perches on the Key of Prosperity and Progress. On the frieze around th
building, near its top, the names of fifty-nine legendary Texans are carved. The first letters of the fir
eight names, reading left to right—Burleson, Archer, Rusk, Travis, Higg, Ellis, Lamar, and Milam–
spell the architect's name, minus only the final *e*. A playful touch, a buried secret: These woul
become hallmarks of his eldest son's art, as well.

John Staub, for whom Barthelme worked from 1937 to 1939, was Houston's most eclectic architec
He made his career designing houses in a variety of architectural styles for the city's elite. His house
were among the first in Houston to accommodate air-conditioning. While working for Staub, on
commission from the Humble Oil and Refining Company, Barthelme designed the company
prototype super service station—an attempt to lure customers by making gas stations look dynam
and progressive.

Barthelme organized his own practice in Houston in 1940. "I told [Staub] I just didn't like the fa
that he didn't change anything," Barthelme said. "I didn't mind his traditionalism, but I thought h
should improve on it, use it as a taking-off place. I just can't understand why you take something an
slavishly copy it." That year, Barthelme won eighth place in a national competition sponsored b
Architectural Forum magazine for a house, "the qualifications of which," according to contest rule
"should be the provision of a livable area so enclosed and organized by the materials used as to rela
the elements of the building to one another, to the building as a whole, and to the land." Barthelme
nondoctrinaire design, emphasizing spaciousness and light, was a personal exploration of mode
materials and environmental sensitivity. He had now fully clothed himself in the modern.

In ~~1939, when Don was eight years old, his father conceived a house for the family in the~~ new platted West Oaks subdivision off Post Oak Road in what was then the extreme suburban fringe o Houston, well beyond the city limits. Completed in 1941, at 11 North Wynden Drive, the Barthelm house was unlike any the city had ever seen. A low-lying, dark-colored, flat-roofed rectangle wit irregular projecting volumes and open interior spaces, it was “wonderful to live in but strange to se on the Texas prairie,” Don said. “On Sundays people used to park their cars out on the street and star We had a routine, the family, on Sundays. We used to get up from Sunday dinner, if enough cars ha parked, and run out in front of the house in a sort of chorus line, doing high kicks.”

His youngest brother, Steve, recalls, “The furniture . . . wasn’t like other people’s furniture. It wa architect furniture, a lot of swoopy Scandinavian stuff”—Alvar Aalto and Eero Saarinen—“with larg side helpings of Eames, the kind of furniture that pretty much stands up to announce, in a deep, ric chrome or molded-plywood voice, ‘Hi. I’m the chair.’ ”

Before getting the go-ahead on his house, Barthelme had to wheedle the builder and the bank’s loa officer. Among other things, they were concerned about the master bedroom’s door. There wasn’t one There was a screen behind the wall, say Rick and Steve, for “those non-architectural moments.”

One of the interior walls was brick. The others were made of redwood. A circular stairway led to boxy room, which first served as Barthelme’s studio but then became Don’s bedroom as more childre were born. Peter had arrived in 1939. Then Frederick was born in 1943, and Steven in 1947. “Th atmosphere of the house was peculiar,” Don said. There were “very large architectural books aroun and the considerations were: What was Mies doing, what was Aalto doing, what was Neutra up t what about Wright? My father’s concerns, in other words, were to say the least somewhat differe from those of the other people we knew.” In addition, he said, his mother had a wicked wit, which kep the kids hopping. She was their own “Lady of Texas,” a playful but formidable figure.

Perhaps this hothouse ambience accounts in part for the kids’ later achievements. Joan became th first woman named corporate vice president in the male-dominated Pennzoil Company; Peter, successful advertising man, published a series of sophisticated mystery novels; Rick and Stev English professors at the University of Southern Mississippi, pursue literary fiction, both with gre success. The “sheer literary talent and output of the Barthelme family has never, I think, bee sufficiently recognized,” wrote the literary critic Don Graham. “Perhaps only the James family- Henry, William, Henry senior—surpasses them in this regard.”

Barthelme was never happy with the house. He changed it constantly, taking saws to the furnitur rearranging the space, covering the floors—first with tatami mats, then tiles, then different tiles, the rugs. The kids came to see their house—“a cigar box with a cracker box on top,” they said—as perpetual work in progress, always subject to revision. The old man had “an ever-ready work force” his children, Steve recalls. “He was prone to handing each of us a hammer and saying, ‘Tear out th wall there.’ ”

Along one side of the house, bamboo served as a privacy shield. Its roots kept sneaking into th plumbing, requiring frequent repair. At one point, Barthelme covered the exterior wood with coppe believing that the copper, when coated with an acid compound, would discolor attractively. It simpl turned brown, leaving him dissatisfied, though his kids liked the warps and ripples in it, the feel of th wood’s runnels underneath, and the soft light variations caused by reflections from swelling Gu Coast clouds.

With its sharp corners and adjustable pathways, the house could be tricky terrain for a normall active child. Don had a further complication, which he discussed with J. D. O’Hara in the

preparatory conversations for the *Paris Review* interview:

> There was one thing that . . . affect[ed] my childhood, which is that was subject to fits. I don't quite want to say that it was petit mal. was some sort of fits I had as a child, between eight and twelve or si and twelve, and I used to black out and fall, and it seems to hav affected me. My family took me to a doctor to have me inspected by neurologist who was then thought to be the best there was, and I ha to take medication and so on. But it's something that comes on yo very suddenly, and you fall down and you go away, black out, an you come to . . . and this was really the main thing I remember abou that period, the first dozen years, is that I was subject to this. An then, quite mysteriously, it stopped.

O'Hara asked him if the spells were "impressive for Dostoyevskian reasons." Don replied, "No, it the loss of control. I mean, when you fall down without any warning, black out, it teaches yo something. It had nothing to do with ecstasy, I'll tell you, it had to do with somebody or somethin that could take away your consciousness at its volition rather than yours."

He concluded, "Since it went away and has never come back, I think it probably manifests itse now only in dreams. Certainly dream correlations to this kind of feeling have endured into [m mature life."

Don deleted this exchange from the interview and never again spoke publicly of his "fits." In th 1970s, he told a friend, Karen Kennerly, that his first memory of childhood was of having a seizur His narrator in "See the Moon?" (1966) speaks of being "moonstruck," a word once used as euphemism for epilepsy, and in his third novel, *Paradise* (1986), the main character, Simon, respond to his doctor's question, "Ever been subject to epilepsy?" by saying, "I had seizures when I was child. They stopped. I think it was petit mal."

If Don's memory of taking medications is correct, it's likely that he was among the first children i this country to be given the anticonvulsant phenytoin, more commonly known as Dilantin, which can into widespread use in 1938. As an adult, he frequently spoke of being "nervous in the world," lingering effect, perhaps, of the "fits." In any case, the abrupt blackouts sometimes made his father house, ever-changing in the elder Barthelme's search for perfection, a challenge to negotiate.

"Modernist architecture was a crusade, a religion, and the faithful couldn't just go out and buy a ru like other folks," Steve says. Once, Barthelme decided he had to design a rug, which meant the fami had to make one. "It took a month or so. About twelve feet by fifteen, assembled from three carpet cut into long strips. It was a nice-looking thing once we finally got it finished and down, at one end the big open living area, lying over the ghosts of those ornery tatami mats . . . which had the annoyin habit of continually getting torn or disarranged."

For better or worse, Barthelme's "crusade" kept the family in a perpetual state of excitement. O the back porch, he kept his handsaws and rasps, his coffee cans full of nails. When Barthelme senior

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