Donald Barthelme

One of the most innovative and influential American writers of the twentieth century, Donald Barthelme was born in Philadelphia in 1931 and died of cancer in Houston, Texas, in 1989. Barthelme's stories reflect the slippery slope of postmodern American life, in which the bizarre and the mundane merrily coexist. In his story "Me and Miss Mandible," a thirty-year-old man is sent back to sixth grade, where two women, his teacher and an eleven-year-old classmate, feud over his affection. In "The Indian Uprising," a modern-day boy tries to resist a bizarre invasion. In "The King of Jazz," Hokie Mokie has to defend his title against a Japanese upstart.

The critic Lois Gordon writes that Barthelme "rejects traditional chronology, plot, character, time, space, grammar, syntax, metaphor, and simile, as well as the traditional distinctions between fact and fiction. What used to organize reality—time, space, and the structure of language—is now often disjointed, and language, and the difficulties in 'using' it, becomes the very subject of his art. Most obvious is... its refusal to be an orderly reflection of, and comment upon, a stable, external world."

Barthelme's story "At the End of the Mechanical Age" exemplifies this style while simultaneously poking fun at social mores and sexual politics. In the story—a combination of Adam and Eve, Noah's Ark, and Monty Python—God is an electrician. While God skulks in the background, tinkering with the power, the Adam-like narrator names types of workshop tools instead of animals and addresses his "Eve" formally by her last name. All this makes for a strange and hilarious postmodern myth.

At the End of the Mechanical Age

I went to the grocery store to buy some soap. I stood for a long time before the soaps in their attractive boxes, RUB and FAB and TUB and suchlike, I couldn't decide so I closed my eyes and reached out blindly and when I opened my eyes I found her hand in mine.

Her name was Mrs. Davis, she said, and TUB was best for important cleaning experiences, in her opinion. So we went to lunch at a Mexican restaurant which as it happened she owned, she took me into the kitchen and showed me her stacks of handsome beige tortillas and
the steam tables which were shiny-brite. I told her I wasn't very good with women and she said it didn't matter, few men were, and that nothing mattered, now that Jake was gone, but I would do as an interim project and sit down and have a Carta Blanca. So I sat down and had a cool Carta Blanca, God was standing in the basement reading the meters to see how much grace had been used up in the month of June. Grace is electricity, science has found, it is not like electricity, it is electricity and God was down in the basement reading the meters in His blue jump suit with the flashlight stuck in the back pocket.

"The mechanical age is drawing to a close," I said to her.

"Or has already done so," she replied.

"It was a good age," I said. "I was comfortable in it, relatively. Probably I will not enjoy the age to come quite so much. I don't like its look."

"One must be fair. We don't know yet what kind of an age the next one will be. Although I feel in my bones that it will be an age intimal to personal well-being and comfort, and that is what I like, personal well-being and comfort."

"Do you suppose there is something to be done?" I asked her.

"Huddle and cling," said Mrs. Davis. "We can huddle and cling. It will pall, of course, everything palls, in time..."

Then we went back to my house to huddle and cling, most women are two different colors when they remove their clothes especially in summer but Mrs. Davis was all one color, an ochre. She seemed to like huddling and clinging, she stayed for many days. From time to time she checked the restaurant keeping everything shiny-brite and distributing sums of money to the staff, returning with tortillas in sacks, cases of Carta Blanca, buckets of guacamole, but I paid her for it because I didn't want to feel obligated.

There was song I sang her, a song of great expectations.

"Ralph is coming," I sang, "Ralph is striding in his suit of lights over moons and mountains, over parking lots and fountains, toward your silky side. Ralph is coming, he has a coat of many colors and all major credit cards and he is striding to meet you and culminate your foggy dreams in an explosion of blood and soil, at the end of the mechanical age. Ralph is coming preceded by fifty running men with spears and fifty dancing ladies who are throwing leaf spinach out of little baskets, in his path. Ralph is perfect," I sang, "but he is also full of interesting tragic flaws, and he can drink fifty running men under the table without breaking his stride and he can have congress with fifty dancing ladies without breaking his stride, even his socks are ironed, so natty is Ralph, but he is also right down in the mud with the rest of us, he markets the mud at high prices for specialized industrial uses and he is striding, striding, striding, toward your waiting heart. Of course you may not like him, some people are awfully picky... Ralph is coming." I sang to her, "he is striding over dappled plains and lazy rivers and he will change your life for the better, probably you will be fainting with glee at the simple touch of his grave gentle immense hand although I am aware that some people can't stand prosperity, Ralph is coming. I hear his hoofsteps on the drumhead of history, he is striding as he has been all his life toward you, you, you."

"Yes," Mrs. Davis said, when I had finished singing, "that is what I deserve, all right. But probably I will not get it. And in the meantime, there is you."

God then rained for forty days and forty nights, when the water tore away the front of the house we got into the boat, Mrs. Davis liked the way I maneuvered the boat off the trailer and out of the garage, she was provoked into a memoir of Jake.

"Jake was a straight-ahead kind of man," she said, "he was simpleminded and that helped him to be the kind of man that he was." She was staring into her Scotch-and-floodwater rather moodily I thought, debris bouncing on the waves all around us but she paid no attention. "That is the type of man I like," she said, "a strong and simplesminded man. The case-study method was not Jake's method, he went right through the middle of the line and never failed to gain yardage, no matter what the game was. He had a lust for life, and life had a lust for him. I was inconsolable when Jake passed away." Mrs. Davis was drinking the Scotch for her nerves, she had no nerves of course, she was nerveless and possibly heartless also but that is another question, gutless she was not, she had a gut and a very pretty one ochre in color but that was another matter. God was standing up to His neck in the raging waters with a smile of incredible beauty on His visage, He seemed to be enjoying His creation, the disaster, the waters all around us were raging louder now, raging like a mighty tractor-trailer tailgating you on the highway.

Then Mrs. Davis sang to me, a song of great expectations.

"Maude is waiting for you," Mrs. Davis sang to me, "Maude is waiting for you in all her seriousness and splendor, under her gilded onion dome, in that city which I cannot name at this time, Maude waits. Maude is what you lack, the profundest of your lacks. Your every year since the first year has been a year for Maude, only you did not know it until I, your dear friend, pointed it out. She is going to heal your scabby and generally unsatisfactory life with the balm of her Maudeness, luckiest of dogs, she waits only for you. Let me give you
my practiced eye, no giant figure looms there and that is why I have
decided to marry you, temporarily, with Jake gone and an age ending. It
will be a marriage of convenience all right; and when Ralph comes, or
Maud and me, then our arrangement will automatically self-destruct, like
the tinted bubble that it is. You were very kind and considerate, when
we were drying out, in the tree, and I appreciated that. That counted for
something. Of course kindness and consideration are not what the great
songs, the song and the review, the thing, the review, promise. They are merely
flaky substitutes for the terminal experience. I realize that and want you to
realize it. I want to be straight with you. That is one of the most
admirable things about me, that I am always straight with people, from
the sweet beginning to the bitter end. Now I will return to the big house
where my handmaids will proceed with the robing of the bride."

It was cool in the meadow by the river, the meadow Mrs. Davis had
selected for the pavilion, I walked over to the tree under which my
friend Blackie was standing, he was the best man, in a sense.

"This disgusts me," Blackie said, "this hollow pretense and empty
sham and I had to come all the way from Chicago."

God came to the wedding and stood behind a tree with just part
of His effulgence showing, I wondered whether He was planning to
bless this makeshift construct with His grace, or not. It's hard to imag-
ine what He was thinking of in the beginning when He planned every-
thing that was ever going to happen, planned everything exquisitely
right down to the tiniest detail such as what I was thinking at this very
moment, my thoughts about His thoughts, planned the end of the
mechanical age and detailed the new age to follow, and then the bride
emerged from the house, with her train, all other in color and very
lovely.

"And do you, Anne," the minister said, "promise to make whatever
mutually satisfactory accommodations necessary to reduce tensions
and arrive at whatever previously agreed-upon goals both parties have
harmoniously set in the appropriate planning sessions?"

"I do," said Mrs. Davis.

"And do you, Thomas, promise to explore all differences thor-
oughly with patience and inner honesty ignoring no fruitful avenues of
discussion and seeking at all times to achieve rapprochement while
eschewing advantage in conflict situations?"

"Yes," I said.

"Well, now we are married," said Mrs. Davis, "I think I will retain
my present name if you don't mind, I have always been Mrs. Davis and
your name is a shade graceless, no offense, dear."

"O.K.," I said.
Then we received the congratulations and good wishes of the guests, who were mostly employees of the Mexican restaurant, Raul was there and Consuelo, Pedro, and Pepe came crowding around with outstretched hands and Blackie came crowding around with outstretched hands, God was standing behind the caterer’s tables looking at the enchiladas and chalupas and chile con queo and chicken mole as if He had never seen such things before but that was hard to believe.

I started to speak to Him as all of the world’s great religions with a few exceptions urge, from the heart, I started to say “Lord, Little Father of the Poor, and all that, I was just wondering now that an age, the mechanical age, is ending and a new age beginning or so they say, I was just wondering if You could give me a hint, sort of, not a Sign, I’m not asking for a Sign, but just a hint as to whether what we have been told about Your nature and our nature is, forgive me and I know how You feel about doubt or rather what we have been told You feel about it, but if You could just let drop the slightest indication as to whether what we have been told is authentic or just a bunch of apocryphal heterodoxy—”

But He had gone away with an insanely beautiful smile on His lighted countenance, gone away to read the meters and get a line on the efficacy of grace in that area, I surmised, I couldn’t blame Him, my question had not been so very elegantly put, had I been able to express it mathematically He would have been more interested, maybe, but I have never been able to express anything mathematically.

After the marriage Mrs. Davis explained marriage to me.
Marriage, she said, an institution deeply enmeshed with the mechanical age.
Pairings sliding upon by law were but reifications of the laws of mechanics, inspired by unions of a technical nature, such as nut with bolt, wood with wood screw, aircraft with Plane-Mate.
Permanence or impermanence of the bond a function of (1) materials and (2) technique.
Growth of literacy a factor, she said.
Growth of illiteracy also.
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.
God interested only in grace—keeping things humming.

Blackouts, brownouts, temporary dimmings of household illumination all portents not of Divine displeasure but of Divine indifference to executive-development programs at middle-management levels.
He likes to get out into the field Himself, she said. With His flashlight. He is doing the best He can.
We two, she and I, no exception to general ebz/flow of world juice and its concomitant psychological effects, she said.
Bitter with the sweet, she said.

After the explanation came the divorce.
“Will you be wanting to contest the divorce?” I asked Mrs. Davis.
“I think not,” she said calmly, “although I suppose one of us should, for the fun of the thing. An uncontested divorce always seems to me contrary to the spirit of divorce.”
“That is true,” I said, “I have had the same feeling myself, not infrequently.”

After the divorce the child was born. We named him A.F. of L. Davis and sent him to that part of Russia where people live to be one hundred and ten years old. He is living there still, probably, growing in wisdom and beauty. Then we shook hands, Mrs. Davis and I, and she set out Ralphward, and I, Maudeward, the glow of hope not yet extinguished, the fear of pall not yet triumphant, standby generators ensuring the flow of grace to all of God’s creatures at the end of the mechanical age.

Barry Hannah

Barry Hannah, born in Clinton, Mississippi, in 1942, earned a B.A. from Mississippi College in 1964 and a Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing from the University of Arkansas in 1967. His first novel, Geronimo Rex in 1972, won the William Faulkner Prize for writing. Hannah has taught at a number of universities, including the University of Iowa and the University of Mississippi, where he has long served as writer-in-residence. In 1978 his collection of stories Airships (in which “Water Liars” appears) earned him wide praise, a devoted audience, the Arnold Gingrich Short Fiction Award, and, in 1979, the Award for Literature from the American Institute of Arts and Letters. In all, he has published more than a dozen novels and story collections, each