

Hogg

Tyrone Williams

Searching For Music, Finding Only Noise

In line for the post-Civil Rights goodies promised by the first man on the moon, our carts filled with college-prep classes, we somehow fell out of lockstep, fell back into thrown-away-perfectly-good-white-boy-just-like-a-nigger. Check out? Can your ass cover this bum rush?

Later, with gun barrels kissing the backs of our heads, one does not wonder, not then, if they still make lemon chocolate cookies, if the last person to turn out those green-friendly lights will recall Casper the Ghost, much less Castor oil...

Much later, before he cashed out, Bill wrote a lot, worked even more, and left a few things for me to finish up...

“china,” in England, as a term of Cockney endearment....



Paper

In one of his few written harangues against the composite absurdity of his ethnic, racial, social, political and sexual lives, the late Detroit community actor, fiction writer and poet William Hogg summarized his ridiculousness—vis-à-vis the city in which he was born—thusly: “Let’s face it, Detroit ain’t made for a white faggot who thinks he’s black, regards his sexuality as important only in a political sense (but has been driven to try to make it more important)[,] honestly feels that most cultures have something more to offer than a weekend ethnic festival and believes in magic, music and people.” Nothing about this self-definition would have struck any Detroiter as unusual in the late 1970s except, perhaps, the insistence on “magic.” By which he meant, specifically, comic books, poetry, theater, the ways that each of these art forms points beyond, while tethered to, for a little longer, the human adventure. Come to think of it, that definition applies to people too, for what do we love in those we love except that which promises what can never be delivered—transcendence—even as the limitations of our words and bodies betray us to the earth that patiently awaits our return? Certainly this knowledge is evident in the words Bill left behind. For a couple of years after his death I tried to get those words into print with a publishing house but failed to do so. Perhaps the truth is that much of that work seems trapped, like the Detroit I left, in a once fertile past. Yet the work is better than a great deal that currently lines the shelves of the few remaining bookstores. Perhaps the truth is simply what one publisher wrote me: it’s difficult enough to publish the work of an unknown writer; to publish the work of an unknown writer posthumously is almost impossible. Still, I would like to imagine that one day what follows will have been merely a preface to a collection of his writings.

hemp, rattan, mulberry, bamboo, rice straw, and seaweed

American Crawl

emmitt's voice is a soggy
brownpaperbag drenched in
rain, it flops
against my door, runs
down and
dribbles
un
through the cracks. his
shadow
weaves a
slowmotion backstroke
along
thin rivers in the floor—he
dives in to join it
looks up
and says
"man bill this
aaaaccciid
is a
triiip," then
kicks deeper, strokes
faster
down
into the waiting ocean.



Or

William Hogg—Bill to his friends—kept the things of this world in black plastic garbage bags and brown paper grocery bags. For most of his life, for most of the time I knew him, some eighteen years or so, he was poor, his economic situation stabilizing only a couple of years before his death. He had just purchased a new computer and a new car when he was forced to enter a hospital for respiratory problems and slipped into the coma from which he never awoke. He understood the transience of all things and because he was not particularly interested in or concerned with “public” appearances, however fragile his sense of himself, his place in this world, his body itself, these brown paper grocery bags and black plastic garbage bags served him well as multi-purposeful luggage, desks drawers, and storage devices. Those bags stuffed into corners and closets always gave Bill the air of a tramp, a hobo, a man one paycheck away from being homeless. Yes, Bill moved constantly, or so it seemed to me, going from one apartment to another, and since most of his possessions were in those bags he was almost always packed, always prepared to get up and go.





Plastic

Strange that I should recall them; ordinarily, when I think of Bill, I think of his closet full of comic books. He was an inveterate reader and collector. Less than a sign of arrested development, they were, I think, or want to think, an apt representation of the way that Bill understood the intrinsic absurdity of American life in the 20th century. Of course, Bill being Bill, this indictment included himself as well. We were all performers, actors and actresses, cartoons pretending to be everything we were not. Bill's observations are neither profound nor unique. We've all heard and read this kind of analysis before. In so many ways Bill was just an ordinary man, but because he was my friend, I know that he was an ordinary man who was not allowed to be an ordinary man. Because what he wanted to be, his understanding of ordinariness, turned out to be impossible. He was the customer in the grocery store who, when asked "paper or plastic?" could only reply, "Yes."



Or

Had we been boarding a Greyhound bus in the downtown area of some faltering metropolis, far from whatever shopping and banking remained, far from the occasional restaurants and unremarkable, however touted, tourist attractions, Bill's brown paper bags of clothing, comic books and toiletries might not have warranted a single glance, much less a double take. But we were boarding the Amtrak to Toronto, and though we were boarding from Detroit, a city long in decline but still, at that time, vibrant with possibility, our fellow passengers looked askance at Bill, at me, at us. Everyone knew that you had to have the proper luggage, be it leather, cloth or plastic. No one traveling to Toronto was supposed to appear as though he was a homeless derelict. To travel on public transportation like Amtrak -as opposed to, say, a Greyhound bus—is to go to church in one's Sunday best—that is, one's weekend attire. Bill's indifference to the niceties of public decorum did not, needless to say, help him in his general desire to be accepted for who and what he was. Indeed, his clothing in general failed to measure up to the stereotype of gay clothing. He didn't have the money or inclination to dress the part.





Paper

Having been such good friends since our introduction by my erstwhile college girlfriend at the time, Bill and I hung out, talked politics and music, all the time. Because he was ethnically Caucasian, he was tolerated, if not welcomed, by “the table,” that nickname that black college students have always given to the special site in student center buildings where they congregate, where they often get accused of segregating themselves, though such judgments are rarely rendered against the many “white” tables surrounding them. The “table” was where I met and talked with many of my friends between classes, where relationships were formed and broken, where arguments and weekend plans first took shape. Bill was the outsider, though his good-natured humor, his refusal to let anyone or anything stop him, his sheer bluster, made him as much a stable of the table as anyone else. Still, he never became friends with anyone else at the table, and when she found out that Bill had come out, my ex-girlfriend gradually drifted away from him.

hemp, rattan, mulberry, bamboo, rice straw, and seaweed

Or

I can't recall now why we decided to go to Toronto except that it was then, as it has long remained, the city for getaways, for short vacations, for Southeastern Michiganders and upstate New Yorkers. Indeed, my girlfriend and I had spent a weekend traipsing up and down Young Street in the early bloom of our relationship. It was a fun city, a safe city, so we were going to hang out. I don't remember much except that we seemed to have had a good time, and though we often talked about doing it—or something similar—again, we never did. We—Bill and me, during the year my girlfriend and I first broke up—did, however, have more than our share of adventures. A few years later, in 1975, we were robbed at gunpoint and my car, a 1974 Maverick, stolen. I recall the date, Feb. 21, 1975, only because I remember thinking, as we were being driven around, guns at our backs, threatened with death, that I had almost made it, had almost gotten to my 21st birthday, quite an accomplishment, I thought, for a young black male from Detroit. I remember thinking that it was too bad that I'd never get to hear the albums in the backseat which I'd recently picked up from *The South End*, the college newspaper where I worked as the pop record critic, though Bill and I were, in fact, coming out of a Kentucky Fried Chicken joint he'd insisted we stop at before I drove him home. We had just gotten off from work at Butler's Shoes, our "regular." As it obviously turned out, our kidnappers let us go (there was no comic book magic of heroic getaways). I felt more embarrassed than anything, especially after we called the police, my parents and my girlfriend. I was mad too—I'd wanted to hear Roy Hargrove's *Song For My Father* and *Rumours*, the new Fleetwood Mac album. I never replaced either album until they came out on cds, themselves passé.

Plastic

Eleven years later I was living in Cincinnati Ohio, involved in a bad relationship with a young Sioux woman who had drinking and drug problems. I'd decided to send her away, return to Detroit, and finish writing my dissertation. How did I get there? How did I leave the city of my birth? How did I leave my girlfriend? How did I leave Bill? Actually, leaving Bill was relatively easy. By 1980, some five years after the robbery, I was in my second year of graduate school, my relationship with my girlfriend was on the ropes (again), and I was still working at the shoe store (I'd gotten the job courtesy of Bill who'd put a good word in for me) on the occasional weekend. But Bill had left; he was employed in a fairly stable job at Blue Cross/Blue Shield, making a nice salary—not wages—for the first time in his life. He no longer scrambled to pay the rent, to pay utilities. He had, as they say, money to burn. Still, his relationship with men—white and black—was as unstable and fraught with difficulties as ever. When I moved to Cincinnati Ohio three years later we continued our friendship as correspondents. Despite the economic stability he had, Bill was still frustrated with his sex life, his love life: "I'm so sick of cruising bars and breaking cars! Sick of circumstances beyond my control. The harder I try, the harder it gets! Why?!!" So wrote Bill in one of the few letters he sent. He preferred talking on the phone—indeed, he berated me, sometimes good-naturedly, usually not, for not being available when he called. His need for intimacy, for conversation, for the company of others, is no doubt one of the reasons he loved acting and the theatre. At the same time so many of the letters I have emphasize over and over his bouts of self-imposed isolation and his sprees of orgiastic communion with men and their bodies. Yet, no one he met, apparently, could understand this white man whose natural inclinations in speech and food and music were "black," whose love of reading reeled between the adolescent comic book and the high-falutin' pop philosophy and psychology of those post-summer of love days. As he wrote, "I keep searching for music, but find only noise."

cf. Alexander Parkes

unity
Black culture
or anything

african
that might jar your safe little world.
I understand your hang-ups,
But I also understand you'll get
hung up
by your
hang up
if you don't
wake up

now.



Or

In October 1985 Bill called me and told me he'd been diagnosed with HIV. I remember being stunned but I also remember playing it "cool," making some lame joke or inane comment to defuse the tension. I heard later from another friend that he was hurt by my reaction, that he expected me, needed me, to be more upset. As these things go, I became more upset after the phone call. I wasn't in the best shape myself. It had been almost a year to the day since my girlfriend had broken up with me in a stereotypical Dear John letter that arrived on the day she was supposed to come down to visit. A girl I'd been seeing wasn't working out and a girl I'd really wanted to ask out had politely turned me down. I was two months away from becoming involved with Janelle, the Sioux girl (literally—she told me she was 24 but I found out later she was 19) with whom I spent one tumultuous year. No excuses. I thought my life was falling apart. As it so happens, it was, but there was, as there often is, life after life. There would no such second encore for Bill. His life would soon, much too soon, be over.



Paper

When I moved back to Detroit in 1986 to get my head together, to write my dissertation, to put Janelle behind me for good, Bill and I and some of my other friends spent some good times together. In some ways he became better friends with some of them than we ever were. Certainly by then we did not spend as much time together as we had before. Just in the less-than-three years I'd been away from Detroit, everything between me and my friends—including Bill—had changed. So it was not surprising that when I introduced Bill to Peter and Suzanne Ross he not only became fast friends with them but also became friends with two of their closest friends, John McCormick and Toni Swanger. It was a sign of the changes in our relationships that at my “going away” party at some bar in what was then Rivertown—a sop toward urban renewal, which is to say the usual converted warehouses, the usual riverside row of restaurants, nightclubs and bars (see the demised Flats of Cleveland or the sporadic Banks project in Cincinnati for comparison)—Bill was not present. Of course we saw each other on occasion that last year I lived in Detroit but now he had his own friends, his own life, his own concerns, as did I.



hemp, rattan, mulberry, bamboo, rice straw, and seaweed

Or

What changed between us was not simply the inevitable changes that accompany distance and separation between those who had been emotionally close because, in part, they had been geographically close. In October 1985 while I was still in Cincinnati Bill called me to tell me he'd been diagnosed with HIV. I don't recall exactly what I said but I'm sure it was something along the lines of you'll be fine, they're making progress with drugs every day, blah blah blah. It wasn't simply that I was consumed with the disintegration of the relationship between my live-in Sioux girlfriend and me. Something in me, caught off guard, failed to respond in an appropriate way to the news my friend called to deliver. Not that I know, even today, what would have been an appropriate response. What could have been said that was neither alarmist (I'll drive up to see you today) nor cavalier (Well, the drug therapies today are better than they were years ago...)? I suppose I could have said anything you need, Bill, you can count on me. But did I fail to say something like this because I knew, somehow, it was a lie? Or did I fail to respond because I found myself facing, for the first time, the mortality of a close friend and words, as they often have since, failed me?



Plastic

Bill Hogg called me in October 1985 to tell me he'd been diagnosed with HIV. Bill Hogg died in Detroit Ford Hospital in August 1991. I was visiting the Rosses who had, by then, moved to Philadelphia. I remember Kim Hunter calling me to tell me I had to visit Bill—by then in a coma, his second that year—before it was too late. By the time the plane landed in Detroit's Metro Airport he was gone. I attended the memorial services for him and saw his high school friend, Steve Lockhart. We promised to stay in touch but of course we never did. When I look back at the few photographs and letters of Bill that I have I am reminded of those paper and plastic bags he hauled from apartment to apartment, full of comic books. I can still see his closets crammed with comics, clothes. He was a man no one will recall after those who knew him have ourselves disappeared. But like so many other nameless, anonymous individual human beings he made his life a defiant scream, a shout of exuberance, a moment of ecstasy, even if none ever stabilized into a state resembling happiness.

1862, The Great International Exhibition, London

Or

After Bill's phone call in 1985 I took another blood test and sweated out the days waiting for the results. Like many, I'm sure, I rolexed through all my transitory and casual relationships. I resisted the urge to call old girlfriends or one-night encounters to see how they were "doing." At the same time I thought about Bill, tried to think about Bill, as a separate individual, independent of my own concerns and issues. I felt I owed it to him. But I realized I was only fooling myself. Who and what Bill was was, for me, inseparable from who and what Bill was to me.



Paper

Bill Hogg died in the summer of 1991. I figured out later that I'd been getting off a plane (from Philadelphia where I'd visited the Rosses) when he passed. At his memorial service a few of his friends and I promised to stay in touch to celebrate his memory. With the exception of my longtime friend Kim Hunter, I have never seen any of them again. What remains: his remains after the cremation, short stories, his poems, a few letters, stuffed into a metal file cabinet, and the fading memories of those who knew him, and

hemp, rattan, mulberry, bamboo, rice straw, and seaweed
Ishangi

many bodies, one
mind, flowing/

dancing/

living music of Africa

forming dreams with tribal movement

spirit of ancestors

culture of generations

power of love

beauty

born in Ghana for all nations to

feel

Ishangi

family of peace.

Notes

Black superhero images culled from the website

<http://www.bamkapow.com/15-of-the-greatest-black-superheroes-of-all-time-1484-p.html>

Legion of superhero images culled from website

<http://www.comicvine.com/legion-of-super-heroes/65-19241/>

Original poems composed by Bill Hogg (1955-1991).