

William Dunlap is not like you and me. I've always known that his wit was quicker, his pen and brush abler, his take on the world funnier than almost anyone else's. What I didn't know is that this self-styled Southern-gentleman/rock-star character—this blue-eyed, fashion-forward, keenly observant, gallant, sharp-tongued, thoughtful, peripatetic, laughing, brooding, always-intense artist—had it in him to be a writer of starkly arresting fiction.

Billy is full of opposites. He is at once a hedonist and a stoic, entertainer and introvert, satirist and social worker. He is as loyal a friend as it is possible to be, and yet a more mercurial, independent man would be hard to find. It is difficult to think of a more devoted husband and father—in the same skin as this restless, roving, adventure-seeking critic of the universe. He functions literally as a critic on public television, opining on selected artists and their exhibitions, but rarely does he bring a liverish or dismissive tone to his pronouncements. In the public arena he tends to be resolutely upbeat, favoring the celebratory and the encouraging. In private he can be counted on to bring a biting, even lacerating perspective to any discussion. His dismissals or scabrous jokes at someone else's expense are delivered, however, somehow impersonally and in an atmosphere of the light, passing jibe. The darkness beneath the generosity is only subtly glimpsed.

So now we have these stories. They stand on their own as bitter little parables: hilarious narratives of nubile innocence and its natural potential for depredation; fables of vanity and of the joys and perils of dandyish self-importance that Oscar Wilde would recognize as his very meat. Jonathan Swift is hardly more acid in his indictments of institutional depravity than Dunlap taking on the Church in "Fable of the Holy See"; and who, including Bill's acquaintance Tom Wolfe, has more pointedly skewered the kitschy heart of America's decadent elite than he does in "A Life Well Lived"? Sometimes the writer summons his own experience (we glimpse the subversive schoolboy in the classroom), and we can imagine his witnessing a scene in a Waffle House not so different from that in "Open All Night." More often he weaves his parables with threads from the countless movies and histories and other lore of World War II ("WHAM! BAM! POW!") that a curious and literate Southern lad inevitably made his own. Dunlap has always harbored a fascination for the romantic, twentieth-century paradigm of the heroic-yet-sensitive, virile, erudite, adventurous sexual and cultural pioneer. Jack London and John Steinbeck and Ernest Hemingway and Isak Dinesen created chivalric legends that will live forever in Bill's heart; Walker Percy and Hunter S. Thompson created hyper-realistic myths that are lodged in his gut. And of course he would have to have been led to the great American entrepreneur and adventurer Jim Thompson—savior of the Thai textile industry in the mid-twentieth century, raconteur, catalyst for generations of Western seekers and sensualists in Thailand—whose legend and reality seem to have pierced Dunlap to the core. Still, with "Digressions on Viticulture," he proves that even his most sanctified subjects are not immune to a skewering from his bird's-eye vantage, which sees the fatuousness of everything self-dramatizing. He turns the things he most loves into fodder for ridicule and then redeems them with *tours de force* of sheer comic brilliance.

These stories need no illustration from the artist's adroit pen. And yet they are comfortably juxtaposed here with his parallel world of visual meanderings. As a longtime consumer of Dunlap's visual art, I have often been more responsive to the intricacies of his small-scale drawings than to the narrative macrocosms of the larger painting compositions. When the two are in harmony, the paintings work effortlessly; when, in the paintings, discordant

or disconnected elements occur, they are sometimes diminished and sometimes made more compelling. Even when the imagery is indigestible, the artist has generally insisted on presenting highly finished, worked-through compositions rather than informal doodlings or ideas in progress. But now, with this publication, it is possible to experience the prodigiousness of Dunlap's wrist in some less-calculated, less-finished meanderings with pen and pencil. As a painter, he has stubbornly hewed to a fundamentally conservative tradition in terms of medium, technique, format, and style. He is part of a thread in American art that includes both Winslow Homer and Andrew Wyeth. What separates his paintings and drawings decisively from those more literal, earlier artists is an undercurrent of violence or dread or loss. This quality connects his visual work to many of his southern compatriots in the realms of poetry and literature. Dunlap is emphatically not a bucolic, or *plein air*, painter. He is a studio artist, a pure inventor. Every work comes from a narrative that springs from the artist's cumulative preoccupations, filtered through his often-vexed imagination.

Now suddenly we are called upon to evaluate and contextualize these strange stories. It is impossible not to make a few literary comparisons. It seems obvious that most of his resonances are to other Southern writers. I think of the at least partially Southern-associated Donald Barthelme, or John Kennedy Toole, perhaps inescapably of Flannery O'Connor. In Dunlap's case, one needn't just speculate about other writers whose work he might have read—several major figures are, or were, good friends: Gore Vidal, Willie Morris, Barry Hannah, Lee Smith, Winston Groom; historians and memoirists Shelby Foote and Howell Raines; the poets James Dickey, John Foster West, Jonathan Williams—all have been significantly present in his life. He has made the acquaintance of Eudora Welty; he was practically baptized in the myth and magic of William Faulkner. He reads and reads. All of this context may help place the tenor of these short pieces of Bill's, but it doesn't explain them. They seem to come from a place of pure, distilled imagination—a sort of remembering of things that, just because they happened in dreams, are no less true and immediate than what happens in "real life."

Until recently, however, he has not (as far as we knew) written. He is, in his words, a "self-diagnosed dyslexic. Without the technology of Siri, where I can dictate and play around, these stories wouldn't exist." This is an important fact. We are well acquainted with painters and sculptors who could barely read (Dunlap himself cites the severe dyslexia of one of his heroes, Robert Rauschenberg). We are not, however, so familiar with a powerfully right-brained individual who can put words together in quite the tightly woven, forward-propelled, rhythmic fashion of the rascally little fables we have here. The rhythmic part might be associated with the fact that, among his many attributes, Bill Dunlap is no mean drummer. He has played with various bands at various times in his life, always finding the task natural and unforced. A lot of things that come easily to the right-brained wunderkind don't to the left-brained intellectual. In Bill's case, the secret may be a deceptively obvious one. He is a fast-talking and highly articulate gentleman whose gifts and aspirations as a painter help him define himself. He is also a self-described performer, with and without a drum set—he has even referred to himself as a "performance artist." We think of him as a reliably funny, generous, and entertaining friend.

What we also unconsciously know but don't always remember about William Dunlap is that he is perhaps the most attentive, porous listener/observer it is possible to be. How can someone who talks and reacts and creates so much also be imbibing so much? Sometimes the mask descends for a moment, and Bill's attention is directed inward, or we become aware that

the words are being emitted while the brain is absorbing something in another part of the room. We know not only from observation that the listening is happening but also because the wellspring of references and memories is so vast. We also now and then sense the mood of secret cogitation, occasionally of uneasiness or melancholy, that can underlie the performance. The ever-present if deeply buried introvert peers out and, for a brief moment, reveals himself. It is a mysterious thing, this porous receptivity and retention and genius for recreation, especially in one whose external persona is so gloriously perfected. It may be that this quality of heightened listening is the key to the artist. The language—the voice—that we can now suddenly read and thus hear, coming from the place of retention and reflection, offers a whole new point of entry for our appreciation of this inimitable man.

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