

We Lost Bill Harrison

by M J Melneck

I left Missoula and drove into Fayetteville on Labor Day weekend, 1969, in a 1956 Ford Crown Victoria that I'd bought from Jim Crumley for \$325 that I didn't have. Pretty much everything I owned fit in the car, including my wide carriage Olympia SM-9, a wad of bad poetry and a couple of mediocre short stories. I had that, and a dog (Spanky Benchmark) in Montana. Bill had Mer-lee, three kids, two golden retrievers, The Theolo- gian and In a Wild Sanctuary.

The workshops began, and the first thing I learned from Bill was that there are only eight colors in the Crayola box, "And f*%\$#ng 'Burnt Sienna' isn't one of them," he said one after-noon. I don't remember who tried to use that color; I was just glad it wasn't me. We were "al- lowed" two adjectives per fifty pages. Nouns and verbs, verbs and nouns. "Understatement is the particularization of art." The workshops went on; we newbies took and taught Faulkner Grammar, staying only a couple of pages ahead of the stu- dents. At a gathering one night Paul Williams's wife complained to Bill that Paul wanted to write fifteen hours a week. Bill looked her in the eye and said, "Dina, I erase fifteen hours a week."

My assistantship paid \$144 a month, and September's \$75 rent degraded to my one-fourth part of a cinderblock hovel down the hill from the student union—\$30. I was miserable, took In- completes, and drove back to Montana without looking in the rear-view mirror because I knew too well what I'd left behind.

Bill published Lessons in Paradise in '71, the Rollerball book of stories in '75, and in the summer of '76 I got married while Bill published Africana. The first paragraphs of that novel are still, to me, one of the greatest "Oh, shit, here it



Bill Harrison.
Photograph courtesy of the author.

comes" openings I've ever known. I fell in love with Val too, but of course she was too beautiful for ordinary men. I had a finished manuscript of my own *Old Music*, though it would take three agents and twenty plus years to get it published. I sent Bill fifty or so pages and he invited Pat and me to come back to finish my MFA. Hello, Fayetteville, 1978. Make up the Incompletes, teach, write, adopt three Special Needs kids, and watch Bill put out *Savannah Blue*, then *Burton and Speke*. In the midst of that came *A Shining Season*, for which he won a prize. I took the MFA in two years, got a three-year no-tenure teaching gig, then went to work for President Martin as Director of University Information. Bill was writing *Three Hunters*.

I did this; Bill published *The Buddha in Malibu*. I did that; Bill gave us *The Blood Latitudes*. I



Members of the University of Arkansas Creative Writing program: (front row) Bill Harrison, Carolyn Forché, and Jim Whitehead; (back row) Miller Williams and John Clellon Holmes. Photograph courtesy of the Pryor Center for Arkansas Oral and Visual History, University of Arkansas.

had a “necktie life.” Bill gave us Texas Heat, and Black August, the Rollerball and Mountains of the Moon scripts.

You’ll notice that the constant in these past decades— isn’t me. It’s Bill Harrison. The writer. The guy who got it done. Again and again. He told us one day, in a workshop that hadn’t gone all that well, “You people don’t want to write— you want to have written.” The gap is something like the distance between the near side of this Universe, and the far side of another one. Bill knew the gap like none of us could, then or per- haps now.

Bill made me—makes me—a better writer, per- haps more by inspiration than by instruction. And if there’s a better angel somewhere inside me, Bill still makes me trust it and leaves me a great deal to strive toward. Our visits grew farther apart, as did our phone calls, but I’ve known no stronger bond. I lost it the day he told me he was “losing” nouns.

Bill Harrison changed me, quite for the better. And if he hasn’t changed you, you aren’t paying attention. Bill’s beacon will shine for me all of my own days, and if I can pay it forward as he did so beautifully, long past my time. Because of Bill Harrison I am blessed far beyond my de- serving.

Rest, my friend—you will always be much loved.



Bill Harrison in Africa

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Revision #4

Created 2026-08-18 14:09:54 UTC by Michael Moore

Updated 2026-08-18 14:35:18 UTC by Michael Moore