Books

Unknown Solutions

Inflorescence and *Long Distance* by Sarah Hannah '91SOA, '05GSAS.

By
Eric McHenry
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"Garden" by Renee Rothbein, 1924-2001. "I bring flowers — cosmos, phlox, and hollywood, / Your favorite — from our garden," writes Sarah Hannah in "Westwood Lodge, 1980-1990." (Used by permission of Tupelo Press)

“My father had a workshop / In the basement of our house,” Sarah Hannah ’91SOA, ’05GSAS wrote in Longing Distance, her first book of poems, and “[. . .] in the years after / He left, still I continued / To creep down there alone, / Snap on the light, and stare / At all the myriad contrivances— / The bearings and the fasteners, / The rusting jars of unknown solutions.”

Hannah died by her own hand last May, and it is difficult, now, not to approach her work the same way she approached her father’s workbench — looking for evidence. When a writer commits suicide, everything she wrote becomes a suicide note. And even if the poems shed little light on the death, the death will inevitably cast shadows on the poems. There is no way, as Albert Goldbarth has pointed out, to read Anne Sexton or Sylvia Plath without “the happenstance of elegiac context,” or to “separate the great, exclamatory / words of Shelley from the seareek / of his body.”

The temptation to comb Hannah’s writing for clues may be particularly strong. Of the three prominent American poets (all with Columbia connections) who took their own lives in 2007, she appeared to have the most life to take. A stroke had recently robbed Landis Everson ’51GSAS of the ability to write. Liam Rector, who taught at Columbia from 2002 until 2006, was battling cancer and a heart condition. Hannah was 40 years old, physically healthy, and just coming into her own as a poet. Longing Distance (2004) had been well received, and she was by all appearances eagerly awaiting the publication of her second collection, Inflorescence, at the time of her death.

That collection, moreover, is an unflinching account of the decline and death of Hannah’s mother, the expressionist painter Renee Rothbein, and it includes frank descriptions of Rothbein’s mental illness and multiple suicide attempts. It’s a book, in other words, that constantly reminds the reader of its author’s fate, and that invites all sorts of connection making and conclusion drawing: “you smoked and drank to excess, tried / Twice to gas yourself, ran cars into trees,” Hannah writes in “Threepence, Great Britain, 1943,” a poem that also makes reference to her grandmother’s psychotic episodes and electroshock sessions. Readers who assume a distinction between poet and speaker are asked not to: “I’ll save you all the trouble, / Provide the proper shelf: this one’s a confession.”

Yet it is precisely this combination of candor and single-minded devotion to her subject that makes Hannah such a selfless poet, and that keeps her own story from

upstaging the one she’s trying to tell. Ultimately, Inflorescence achieves a provisional victory over “the happenstance of elegiac context” by the unlikeliest of means: elegy.

For some time, Hannah explains in her “Cantankerous Author’s Notes,” the book’s working title was Inflorescence, or, How to Know the Wildflowers, “based on the idea, put forth rather insistently throughout this volume, that there are two names for everything.” Indeed. And yet Hannah is never a poet of mere dualities. When she places a flower’s Latin and common names side by side, it’s not so much the opposition that interests her as the indeterminacy — the implication that a specimen can be labeled and pinned to a sheet of Styrofoam but cannot, finally, be pinned down. Appending “(Cnicus benedictus)” to the exquisite poem title “Blessed Thistle” only compounds an extant irony, which Hannah teases out in a series of appropriately dissonant off-rhymed couplets: “Let’s go ahead and bless these double crosses, / These leaves about to stick us in a hundred places.”

If Hannah is insistent that there are two names for everything, she’s emphatic that there are two things for every name. Inflorescence is, among other things, an extended study of the power of single words to mean severally, whether through etymological subtlety, grammatical ambiguity (does “Cantankerous,” above, modify the notes or the author?), even puns. In the poem “Common Creeping Thyme (Serpillum a serpendo),” Hannah’s muddled mother tries to focus her mind by naming the herbs in her garden while a hospital intern tries to deliver the bad news: “‘Metasta—’ / Rosemary! you holler, Rosemary! as your arthritic hand / Smacks down in triumph on the piled white sheets— // ‘Sized,’ he concludes, then speaks slowly to my face. / ‘It doesn’t look good.’ / I turn to you, repeat / The clause. You beam. You’ve always wanted // A brain tumor.” By the end of the poem, gallows humor has yielded to tenderness and vulnerability, as Hannah comes to terms with the creeping time that is about to overtake her mother:

[. . .] and I pray

To the fluorescent ceiling: Stay this Creep; Shut this book right now, I’ll read it later; Let’s fly back inside another spring

When I am low, just at your hem, knowing Only that woods don’t end and sun Patters into shade, and we run down

Narrow paths to look for fern and toad And early flower.

Flowers were the favorite subject of Hannah's mother, and they are indispensable to Hannah as a figure for her own subject: lovely, fragile, ephemeral, ill-suited to many environments: "After a long time alone / Your house fills with dried flowers," Hannah writes in "Dried Flowers." She continues: "[You] come / To prefer the Victorian fadings of hydrangea / To the gloss and mettle of new leaf. // [. . .] They don't clamor for light or water; / They don't grow in strange directions. // In the dense air, they shatter, fine clouds / Of no color—your children—how they rise! / Without blame or complaint." In the book's extraordinary title poem, flowers brought to comfort Hannah's hospitalized mother prove mercilessly diagnostic:

Canterbury Bells your former painting student Drove down one day from Maine, In a graceful vase of milky green. How we Gasped over those, tolling, pale blue, color Of the liquid morphine.

And the handpicked bunch my friend Brought from her garden in Somerville, Clutched in tin foil: Meadow Rue, Celandine, waving in the air conditioner's Tempered breeze. They won't last the week.

The writer of elegies runs two risks: sentimentality and a studied detachment. Because both are a kind of self-blinkering — the eyes are either averted or clouded by tears — the antidote to both is attention. Hannah was a successful elegist because she was an attentive poet, keen to the world's complexities, never failing to find malignancy in the beautiful or beauty in the malign.

Another temptation, when reviewing the recently deceased, is to be excessively reverent. In the spirit of a poet who never wrote in the hushed tones of the funeral parlor, I won't either. Inflorescence is not a perfect book. Hannah had trouble handling narrative, a weakness for modifiers (the most common side effect of a large vocabulary), and a tendency to pile up participial phrases in a way that saps sentences of their syntactic energy: "And for a moment I believe him, // Sun aslant, articulating volumes— / Fissures in the crumbling rock—envoi // Borne in error to a solitary place, / The dull glass absenting from my eyes, // The oil veil lifting from the world." A few of her concluding lines are real clunkers, too, although the courage to risk clunking is an admirable trait in this age of self-protective evasions.

The suicide of a talented poet is always somewhat baffling — more so than it should be. Readers don't see the life in all its chaos and discomfort, only its most beautiful

and orderly byproducts — what Frost called “momentary stays against confusion.” The question that occurs to me as I read Inflorescence is, on its face, a simplistic and naïve one. It’s a testament to Hannah’s achievement that it keeps arising anyway: How could she have been miserable when she had that mind to keep her company?

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