

MARS NEEDS WOMEN

M I C H A E L L . S H U M A N

Bramble, Infant Martian

By Donald L. Kaufmann

Lulu, 2014

622 pp.

Trade paperback (ISBN 978-1-4834-1525-3): USD \$35.99

ePub edition (ISBN 978-1-4834-1526-0): USD \$2.99

Kindle edition: USD \$2.99

*It is with great sadness that we note the passing of Professor
Donald L. Kaufmann on October 13, 2015.*

—Phillip Sipiora

WE EARTHLINGS LOVE TO CATEGORIZE STUFF. We collect and curate, number and name, arrange, align, and order things to make our lives appear reasonable and predictable. Paintings and sculpture, in museums and in homes, line the walls by artist or category to please the eye and tingle the intellect. We divide currency into denominations and assign value according to appearance. Our children, arranged by size, appear smiling in school photos. When we find stuff, some special thing that does not fit into any category, our imagination categorizes it for us. We perceive order that does not add up, relationships that do not exist, in a brilliant ignition of *pareidolia*, that special human quality allowing us to see unicorns in clouds and Madonna in frosted windows. What can a reviewer, a reluctant tellurian earthbound by circumstance rather than by choice, genetically committed to categorization, do with Donald L. Kaufmann's latest thing called *Bramble, Infant Martian*?

Bramble must be a book, because it is bound and has pages and opens up

on the desk. The cover art, by Missouri poet and small-press publisher Clarence Wolfshohl, shows a disturbingly mature-looking baby tumbling in space between Mars and Earth, and suggests the rough-hewn yet visionary aspect of a William Blake plate. At 622 pages and an 8" × 11" trim size, *Bramble* exceeds the confines of an ordinary volume just as it strains common notions of conventional art. It is certainly a text, because those who eschew ink can buy a Kindle version, delivered without wires, according to Amazon, for \$2.99. It looks like a novel and sounds like an autobiography and probably tastes something like science fiction, but the evidence of each of those senses seems suspect. My own critical pareidolia is both tentative and arguable in the best tradition of humans everywhere, so a satisfactory categorization of either author or product is nowhere guaranteed.

As we expect of most novels, a plot of sorts runs through these pages connecting characters and events in an approximation of everyday life, albeit a seat-of-your-pants, frenzied life where nothing is for sure and street-smarts means survival. We follow Bramble from a devastating initial scene where, as an accidental peeping Tom, he watches his young wife in a clandestine lesbian act, through visits to Miami and stays in Anchorage and moments in Iowa City. We join him in transcendental penis-power group therapy, zoot suit fitting sessions, jazz clubs, orgies, high-rise Pittsburgh universities, and banquet halls preoccupied with spoons. We meet Shelly, Bramble's wife; Geoffrey Curtis, Bramble's friend and obese space poet; Viddie, Bramble's first love; Professor Gammath, Bramble's professor; Master Medwick, penis-power philosopher; Mary "The Drainer," facilitator of urination; Rylander the Third, Bramble's friend, deft with spoons; and others of greater or lesser import. We watch the disintegration of the protagonist's marriage in an on-rush of sight and sound. In Bramble's universe, though, plot is secondary to incident, with event and circumstance trumping any meaningful narrative patterns, and characters generally obscured by the overwhelming presence of the transcendently omnipotent Bramble himself.

Kaufmann, a wry nonagenarian, aligns late 1940s Hipster attitude and lingo with contemporary sensibilities to transcend the normal stylistic expectations of fiction. The author screams at the reader in all caps, interrupts the narrative with interludes, whispers in brackets, punctuates with poetry. The language is at once fluid and fancy, gnarly and obscene, showering sparks of surprising originality. Del Close and John Brent, in an insightful

and adroitly funny 1961 recording *How to Speak Hip*, succinctly explain this Hipster verbal shorthand: “Where in English we are concerned with communicating *exactly* what we want to convey and nothing else, the hipster is satisfied if what he says manages to *include* what he means. Imagine the difference between shooting at a dime from twenty paces with a .22 rifle, and with a 40-gauge shotgun, and you will have a rough approximation of the difference between English and Hip” (Close). And so we observe Kaufmann’s Hip in a passage consistent with the tone throughout the work and the scattershot meaning is only slightly, if at all, obscured by the absence of context:

So newlywed Bramble was flawed, a misfit who couldn’t play the game that said that (if you were a good Hubby and Daddy) you won a 50/50 share of a Golden Anniversary. Such a denouement never had a chance because Caron took the business of marriage seriously. Parenthood, for her, was a dream; for him, a nightmare. Daddy Bramble. An ingrained male dread. Getting in a Daddy Way made him shudder now as he had during the honeymoon or soon afterward when Caron took out the diaphragm and aired out the egg meant for Bramble Junior. Maybe then, he should have communicated his dread to Caron, instead of waiting for Zara’s mouth rape and loads of codeine whisked them into CATATONIA where silence became their mother tongue. Maybe their marital embalmment could have been put on hold if he had fed Caron some of the no-kid jive sanctioned by the childless Gammaths. He could have blasted on the tough economics of child rearing, how she’d have to be a full-time mother, and rely on his sub salary, while baby played among the ruins of poverty. (389)

Kaufmann telegraphs Bramble’s wayward husbandry and fear of conformity, through child-rearing, with the jive sense of a pool hustler not yet ready to leave the playing table. The hipster, immature by psychiatric definition and socially divorced by choice, ponders his wedded future.

If Bramble is an infant Martian, then is Kaufmann’s book science fiction? Little evidence recommends that category. While the motivated teenage Hipster, eager to cop a feel, may have taken his girlfriend to drive-in showings

of *Queen of Outer Space* (1958) with Zaza Gabor and *Mars Needs Women* (1967) with Yvonne Craig, Kaufmann's text generally is devoid of the not-so-clever kitsch making such films perpetual cult classics. Even more accomplished genre films such as *Forbidden Planet* (1956) and *The Day the Earth Stood Still* (1951) somehow miss the mark. The style and substance of Kaufmann's narrative, too, do not reflect the tropes of traditional literary science fiction, and Bramble's Martian adventures appear to coincide with intense sexual ecstasy rather than with interplanetary flight. For a man to visit Mars, Kaufmann suggests, he must have a suitably lascivious and preferably attractive female partner. To be sure, there are elements of certain conical science fiction works throughout Kaufmann's opus. In Robert A. Heinlein's *Stranger in A Strange Land*, for example, Valentine Michael Smith, the lone survivor of the first expedition to Mars, is raised by that planet's decidedly non-human inhabitants and consequently, when returned to Earth, is more alien than human in a perplexing social and political landscape. Such Otherness certainly reflects Bramble's tough times navigating empty social relationships, but the tone and sensibility of the two works are markedly different and the comparison does not withstand extended analysis. The British New Wave science fiction authors of the late 1960s may be a closer match. Works such as Brian W. Aldiss's *Barefoot in the Head*, J. G. Ballard's *The Crystal World*, and American expatriate Samuel R. Delaney's *Dhalgren* all exhibit the textual experimentation and concern with sex, mind-altering drugs, and violation of taboos scattered through *Bramble's* pages. As with these New Wave authors, Kaufmann emphasizes cocky characters who deftly navigate social situations and move through "soft" science scenarios rather than the two-fisted heroes solving "hard" science puzzles in the genre's early decades. Nevertheless, Kaufmann's book sits uneasily on the shelf beside these revolutionary, and now nearly forgotten, works.

Bramble is so singular, so *out there*, that the only comparable body of science fiction may be that of the late F. Gwynplaine MacIntyre, a genre author so removed from literary trends and society that his very name and self-purported biography are questionable. MacIntyre's most accessible works include one novel, *The Woman Between the Worlds*, concerning an invisible female extraterrestrial in Victorian London who resorts to a full-body tattoo in order to join society, and the delightful *Improbable Bestiary: Perverse Verse & Odious Odes*, a whacked collection of poetry and limericks that may outdo Edward Lear in terms of inspired wit and certainly in its wealth

of scandalous content. While both texts resonate with Kaufmann's work in theme and demeanor, a better comparison is with MacIntyre's obscure Smedley Faversham stories published in *Analog Science Fiction and Fact* between 1999 and 2004. Like Bramble, Faversham is a hip and defiantly psychopathic rogue, a wily criminal who dances through time and space with remarkable disregard for social or political law. When he describes his hero's unfathomable retreat to the Big-Bang beginning of creation, in the short story "Put Back that Universe!," MacIntyre's prose is loose and flippant. He ponders how the protagonist can breathe while standing outside space and time:

For that matter—or *lack of* matter—there was nothing solid for Smedley to be standing *on*, since all of the atomic mass in all the infinite dimensions of the universe (minus 189 subatomic particles which still hadn't arrived yet, and Smedley himself) had already converged into the all-consuming hypersphere. By this same application of pitiless logic, the Gentle Readers may also wonder how Smedley was able to *see* the hypersphere, since nearly all the photons in the universe were now *inside* the gravity well of the sphere, beyond reach of Smedly's optic nerves. . . . The Gentle Readers should mind their damned business. (84).

Compare MacIntyre's smart-ass passage with this, as Bramble contemplates the face of a college science teacher:

With digital (20/20 ten times over, no less) eyes, he bathed in the other man's beard. History, as was the custom, was repeating itself. An amoeba had also traced the wilderness on this man's face before it grew gills and fins. Those fingers with eyes waded to a brow that was a hairy swamp. Bramble wanted to stop as had Darwin when his eyes heard the last dinosaur choke on cauliflower. Was it possible that this atavistic creature (his head once full of science) was the link that explained why spines and arid teeth straightened and why thumbs got unstuck on those apes who first dropped from trees [?] Bramble's fingers, like a shaggy mammoth, shook off the excess water. They could now see the real missing link. . . . The mystery had run its course. (241)

Aside from the emphasis on a particularly hallucinogenic form of human perception, both excerpts rely upon staccato and transgressive prose as they follow a self-exiled loner observing nature in its infancy. The Outsider qualities are emphasized by existentially placing each character beyond the context of physical laws and common experience, one at the dawn of human evolution, the other a millisecond before the Big Bang. As each passage concludes, Smedley has swallowed the incipient universe and Bramble, in sexual ecstasy, has touched down on Mars.

If we remain committed to assigning a category to Kaufmann's work, then the off-kilter fiction of the Hipsters and the Beats, those disaffected authors with skewed sensibilities and a distorted notion of narrative form, provides *Bramble's* closest comparison. Books like Jack Kerouac's *On the Road*, William S. Burroughs' *Naked Lunch*, and Ken Kesey's *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* share, with *Bramble*, a nearly psychopathic anti-hero committed to social independence, sexual privilege, and a fanatical dedication to living life in the moment. Norman Mailer did much to define the Outsider attitude of the Hipster in his essay "The White Negro" (1957), arguably one of the most important cultural statements ever uttered by an American artist. Mailer also chose his own antecedents carefully. The epigraph by Caroline Bird preceding his essay is a veritable profile of the Hipster attitude and, consequently, of Kaufmann's protagonist. The Hipster's main goal, according to Bird, is to stay out of society and the cultural extruder that twists and stretches people into conformity. Frequent use of marijuana and other drugs is an important means of acquiring vital experience and perceptions outside the norm, as is listening to jazz and dressing in a snappy fashion, with zoot suits preferred. While it is tempting to define the Hipster as infantile in psychiatric terms, Bird maintains that "the style of his infantilism is a sign of the times, [and] he does not try to enforce his will on others, Napoleon-fashion, but contents himself with a magical omnipotence never disproved because never tested. . . . As the only extreme nonconformist of his generation, he exercises a powerful if underground appeal for conformists, through newspaper accounts of his delinquencies, his structureless jazz, and his emotive grunt words." And so we find Bramble, the titular infantile anti-hero, sidestepping normal society while at various times lazing at pot parties, hallucinating post-sex interplanetary travel, and playing in his jazz band The Heart Attacks in a zoot suit specially fitted for the occasion. If Hipster

had a poster boy (but of course they do not, and never could) Bramble's face would be smiling from the walls of every cathouse and juice joint in town.

Kaufmann's tour-de-force not only aligns with the outlaw fiction of the 1950s and 1960s, but also sits well on the shelf beside late-model Hipster works written by Millennials such as David Foster Wallace, Dave Eggers, and Tao Lin. Indeed, Wallace's *Infinite Jest*, perhaps the high point of the current run of Hipster novels, is an astonishingly thick volume that celebrates its inaccessibility through both the length of the text and the voluminous end-notes and footnotes quietly tempting the reader to resist immersion. As with Kaufmann, Wallace offers experimentation in content and form, dealing with fantastic situations and hallucinogenic experiences as characters navigate their way through a nonsensical society. That a nonagenarian author, writing fiction on an antiquated Smith Corona typewriter, could compete with these modern luminaries is a lesson in perseverance and certainly notice that Kaufmann, following his own Hipster heartbeat, has won the intellectual and cultural independence promoted by his work. Mailer succinctly defines that independence, that unrelenting devotion to the *now*, early in his seminal essay:

[T]he decision is to encourage the psychopath in oneself, to explore that domain of experience where security is boredom and therefore sickness, and one exists in the present, in that enormous present which is without past or future, memory or planned intention, the life where a man must go until he is beat, where he must gamble with his energies through all those small or large crises of courage and unforeseen situations which beset his day, where he must be with it or doomed not to swing. (339)

All evidence in *Bramble* suggests that Kauffman, who wrote one of the first book-length critical studies of Mailer's work in 1969, is not yet beat, and still swings.

If this is a novel, it is a big, imposing rascal of a novel, unhinged from reality and time yet somehow curiously grounded in right-now everyday life. Had *Bramble* been published twenty years ago and promoted by a major publisher, Wallace's preeminence as a contemporary Hipster novelist would have encountered some aggressive competition. At the conclusion of Kaufmann's work, like Smedley Faversham in MacIntyre's short story, Bramble

literally eats the universe in an instant of self-possession and authority. While Faversham enjoys his repast by scooping up the tiny lump of Big Bang matter and energy with his hands, Bramble somewhat more delicately uses a spoon, that ubiquitous icon appearing again and again throughout the work. In either case, though, we witness a committed Outsider, secure in his self-possession and passionately unafraid of committing cosmic crimes, literally putting himself outside of everything in the ultimate expression of Bird's "magical omnipotence." It is an audacious act, much like the long spark leading to the publication of *Bramble* itself, an artifact that defies nomination, resists classification, and remains unstuck in time.

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