

# MENTORS

*Clark Blaise*

I BEGAN TO WRITE FROM A DESIRE to impress my experiences on the obvious blank understanding of my fellow undergraduates at Denison University. I had known a time and place in America — the deep South in the late 1940's — that was already history. I had been let out of school to watch Klan floggings, cross-burnings, and lynchings. I had attended segregated schools, and I had seen alligators, manatees, mountain lions, chain gangs, gar fish, mud-fish, sharecroppers, and I had attended schools with morons and half-wits, been doused with delousing powders, had my feet swabbed with carbolic acid for hook-worms and my hair shaved for ring worm. I'd run away from encampments of Seminole Indians who were not out to sell blankets or wrestle gators, and I'd seen my father, beaten to a pulp by three town marshalls under the direction of a court order, as our little factory was stolen from us.

In the beginning, then, I thought of myself purely as a Southern writer on the basis of five potent years in my life — ages six through ten — spent in the swamplands and hamlets of north-central Florida. Faulkner was my guide; his language, his evocation of doom, of age, of the implacable determinants of race, class, and history. My small world fit perfectly in the Yoknapatawpha legend; I had seen all the same types, gone to schools with them, seen the towns with their statues to the Confederate dead, been dismissed from school for Confederate Memorial Day and Jefferson Davis' Birthday, and listened to my teachers' rapturous litanies on the sins, lineage, and unspeakable practices of the archvillain, Abraham Lincoln. We'd been given little Confederate flags at school so we could line the streets of Leesburg at night, cheering the unmasked parade of the Klan, and the motorcade they led, as it proceeded to Venetian Gardens, a doubleheader, and the crowning of the Watermelon Queen. Where are you now, Dollise Beard, Watermelon Queen of 1948, Senior at Leesburg High?

And like a child out of Faulkner, or Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings, or Willie Morris, I had roamed woods, fished, played, and slumbered in the midst of a tropical torpor that was also a tropical maelstrom. I remember years, it seems now, of retiring to a screened-in porch with nothing but a Coke and the radio

## MENTORS

playing “The Game of the Day” from somewhere up north, but I also recall the furies of Florida: hurricanes, the scream of a mountain-lion, the thrashing of a gator just under a rotten pier, the braiding of water moccasins in my path. I remember trailing an enormous woodpecker so deep into cypress swamps that I was knee-deep in warm water with no path out, and the bird — maybe a classifiably extinct Ivory-Billed, or maybe only a Pilated — was tapping above me while gators whistled nearby and deer could be heard plunging into deeper water that seemed to surround me.

I understood those favourite words of Faulkner, and I used them myself: *deep, beyond, further*. It was Faulkner, to his glory, Faulkner the divine and sometimes tangled rhetorician, who had the extraordinary faith to title a story simply and forever, “Was.”

Those were a few of the realities I wanted to convey to my suburban-bred mid-western classmates at Denison University. That I might look like them, sound like them, behave imperfectly like them, but that I shared nothing of their experience, outlook, values, or ambitions. For the first three or four years that I wrote, I considered myself nothing more than a Southerner, and if the truth dare be told, nothing less than Faulkner’s heir.

“Write what you know,” the instructors teach, but the better instructors know that the process is far more devious than that. If we *know* it, chances are it’s too boring to write. Grace Paley has amended the truism somewhat: “write what you don’t know about what you know,” and that comes closer, for it takes us back into Faulkner’s dark caverns of *beyond, deeper, and ago*. If we wrote only what we knew, and showed and never told, our writing would be crippled of authority (emphasis on the first two syllables). What I *knew*, at the age of twenty, was suburban life in Pittsburgh in the mid-fifties; I knew it cold. I knew the retail trade in furniture, paper routes, baseball, the charms and terrors of women, astronomy, archaeology, and gobs of facts in geography. (It would take five years before I composed those elements in a story, “Grids and Doglegs”; if I had tried it as an undergraduate — and probably I did — it would have come out like warm, flat soda water.)

We are talking of alchemy. Taking the facts, the common language, the world and characters we know, and transforming them into something never before seen, hitherto unknown, and forever fresh. (Do you know what’s wrong with that sentence, the Faulknerite in me asks? It’s that last word, “fresh.” Not wrong because of meaning, but wrong because of rhythm. “Never before seen” is a phrase of five syllables, as is “hitherto unknown” and I must find a two-syllable synonym for “fresh” to balance the scales of “forever.” But I also like the alliteration. “Fragrant?” Or a good Faulknerian “fecund”?) Forever fertile.

Denison has a professor of English, a poet, and a great teacher of poets and fiction writers by the name of Paul Bennett. He gave me a “B” in my senior

year advanced fiction class, so he's no push-over. He also gave me an "A—" in my first writing course in my sophomore year, when I was a struggling Geology major, otherwise doing poorly. He has in common with all great handlers of young talent (I'm thinking specifically of certain baseball coaches, movie directors, and finally, any teacher, any parent) the qualities of faith and patience. Yes, he taught us to write what we knew about, and to write clearly and to show, not tell, but he also emphasized trusting ourselves, trusting our story, pushing beyond what we knew into the realms of discovery. His patience rewarded me with a career: I wrote bad poems, bad character sketches (pure *Readers' Digest* stuff), bad stories about men-in-liferafts, and Western shoot-outs, and then one last story at the end of the course, a story called "Broward Dowdy" which excited him. It was the reason he taught: to see the emergence of talent, to be there when it started to happen. But I was still a Geology student, and I thought I was going to transfer to Pitt — my parents had just started their divorce, and the money for an expensive school like Denison had dried up. But the divorce dragged on and my father was solvent for one more year and I returned to Denison for a third year, bottoming out at the end of the first semester, dropping out for a semester and returning for a senior year, after a summer in Chicago, as an English major and as a writing student. In the two years remaining to me at Denison, I vowed to read a book every day and did so; I started a book-reviewing column for the weekly paper, co-edited the two literary magazines on campus, and published my stories and poems in them. Three years later, when I was married and living as a graduate student in Iowa, "Broward Dowdy" became my first story accepted by a national magazine, and I put it at the head of my second book of stories, fifteen years after writing it.

WHEN I GRADUATED IN 1961, after winning the various campus writing prizes which I also judged (this was in a politically innocent era), with stories so swampy they should have been sprayed, I went on to the summer writing class of Bernard Malamud, at Harvard. I needed validation — Denison was fine and Paul Bennett is a great man — *so far as they went* — the question was, how far did they go? There was only one way to find out, perilous as that way might be. There were hundreds of Denisons out there, and thousands of campus hotshots; but there was only one Malamud, one Harvard, and only ten places in his class.

The luckiest move in my writing-life was the acceptance to Malamud's class. Pure luck — I've had some good breaks since, but I like to think my credentials at least softened the odds — this first one was luck. Malamud was coming to Harvard from Oregon; the ten slots in his class were already chosen by readers

## MENTORS

in the Harvard English Department. Who knows what criteria — but Harvard and Harvard Square is never lacking for dozens of young Updikes and hundreds of young Thomas Wolfes, talents and egos abounding. Fortunately, I hadn't known the course was closed weeks before I'd even sent in my deposit, and my story. Fortunately, it was Bernard Malamud teaching and not some other (at the time) reasonably obscure immortal looking for a well-paid summer vacation in the heart of genteel academia. I went to the English office in Warren House, after hitch-hiking in from Pittsburgh. "Oh, that course was closed weeks ago," the secretary told me. "Is there a waiting list?" I asked, "I sent in my manuscript as soon as I heard Malamud was teaching —" I must have thought that even having heard of Malamud, let alone having read him from the heart of Baptist America, was evidence of sufficient grace to insure admission. To the two of us at Denison who had read Malamud and engaged in a frantic search to uncover the elusive first novel after having devoured *The Assistant* and *The Magic Barrel*, he was the greatest writer in America. I had never seen, let alone met, a "real" writer.

"You can go up and ask him," she suggested.

He's there? I can ask him? It was, I should stress, a different era. Those of us from the provinces had never seen an author we truly admired. I was terrified and I walked around Warren House so many times I was afraid he'd sneak out before I could rehearse my presentation. Finally I confronted myself: you borrowed a hundred dollars for the course. You hitched here. You have a friend in Belmont Hill who's putting you up. You've told yourself you're going to be a writer. Face him, you idiot. Your life is over, here and now, if you can't take his course.

This is your moment of truth, Blaise.

He was seated at the end of a long room. The bookcases were empty but for shoeboxes and stacks of manuscripts, thick bundles bitten by rubber bands. (*That's* a nice little phrase.) There were more stacks on his desk. He was not particularly smiling or welcoming. He said, "I asked them to send me the manuscripts in Oregon, but instead they made the selections. That's not fair to the people who submitted in good faith. Find yours up there and give it to me."

"It's just this story," I said — I'd brought a second copy, razored from our Denison campus magazine. The catalogue hadn't mentioned thousand-page novels as a minimum consideration. "Come to the first class tomorrow, Blaise. I can't promise you're in, only that I'll read it."

I wrote two more very Southern stories for that class. All that Malamud had seen of my work, in fact, were stories with such heavy southern dialogue that I felt absurd reading them aloud in class. There was something of an imposture about me; feeling myself Canadian more than American (the divorce had opened up the floodgates of an urgent nostalgia; I was hitchhiking on all long

weekends up to Quebec City from Belmont Hill), and obviously sounding like any other college-bred Easterner. I was writing scenes that Erskine Caldwell would shun. And the class was as expected: bright, ambitious, and accomplished (at least four others that I'm aware of have gone on to establish writing careers). I was a little embarrassed by my material in that Ivy League, half high-WASP, half-Jewish setting, and I felt the disapproval of my classmates, if not of the teacher. It's so easy to appear the buffoon when you follow your illiterate young characters down a swamp on a gar-hunt, or when idiot brother rapes nympho sister while out giggling frogs. My classmates were writing *European-set* stories, love-affair stories, abortion stories, even Africa stories, and they were submitting *chapters*, not stories. Or they were turning out high-powered intellectual farces and fantasies that echoed Barth and pre-figured Pynchon, Heller, and Vonnegut. The big book of those in the know was Gaddis' *The Recognitions*. Harvard was the big time, all right; the overflow of the next-ten rejectees from Malamud's course was being taught by John Hawkes, just down the hall. At Malamud's prompting, I read *The Lime Twig*, and everything earlier. So: it was possible to keep the rhythms of Faulkner, the rhetoric and incantations of voice, and get rid of that inauthentic Southern material. I rejoiced.

That was the terror I faced. I wanted to write, and life itself had given me a boost by smearing me in the paste of a memorable Southern childhood. But it was an accident. Those memories were a shopping list, and I was quickly exhausting the menu of available experience. Then what? Be a Pittsburgh suburbanite? And so I wrote one very strange story for Malamud that summer; a typically over-ambitious piece of incomprehensible (also Faulknerian) monologue of a senile Canadian doctor, remembering and living (in his hospital bed) his heroic service during the Influenza Epidemic of 1919, while (in searing irony!) he is really an 85-year-old whimpering husk soiling his sheets in a Winnipeg hospital. My grandfather, obviously. At the very least, it was a change of material, though of course (as Malamud pointed out), I had scrambled a good story and a strong character for the dubious pleasures of sophomore experimentation. Of all the things to lift from Faulkner, I had to choose the Benjy monologue.

Malamud's instructions are as simple as the universal reader demands and as complicated as the most ambitious author expects: focus on character, make every act, every detail, dramatic. Fiction dramatizes the multifarious adventures of the human heart — advice that we young Barthists (we'd all read *The Sot-Weed Factor* and *The End of the Road*) and Gaddisites probably associated with the death of literature. That was Dickensian! We wanted the clean lines and sharp edges of Modernism, we'd been raised on irony, juxtaposition, and every conceivable complication of structure. On days when we didn't provide stories of our own, Malamud introduced us to Isaac Babel, Flannery O'Connor, Hemingway, James, Moravia. He read us stories — well-received ones by name-

## MENTORS

less contemporaries — and asked us to think twice before admiring such clever tricks, such facile manipulations. If a name was mentioned in class, by teacher or student, that I hadn't read — a simple enough event in those days, despite the two years of book-a-day reading — I'd have it read twice before the next class.

THE MENTORS THAT LAST in our lives are those who do not press a case, do not try to shape, or inflate; do not lust for miniatures of themselves, or even try to leave much of an impression at all. They are anything but charismatic (I have known many inspirational writing-teachers in my day); they teach by their tolerance and their conviction. They are calm, even serene, in that reconciliation of tolerance and authority, and, I think, they have one other great quality. Malamud, as a reader, as a teacher, and as a writer, takes *delight*; there is no other way of putting it. It was possible to *delight* this man, to see his eyes, mouth, brow suddenly dance over a sentence, a word, an idea. Oh, it is possible to enrage a teacher, to infuriate or to embitter him or her, and many teachers make their point by great shows of anger and fury, or of scathing wit and sustained comedy; only the rarest, I think, instruct by an almost private show of delight.

When the summer school ended and Malamud went on to begin his career at Bennington (odd to think he was forty-seven that summer, so old and powerful and socketed in eternity to me at the time, and how quickly I'm closing on that age now), I stayed back in Boston, getting a job in a bookstore and taking an apartment with one of the wilder members of the summer class. I stayed with the job all winter, thinking I could remain out of university and somehow in the flow of that thing called "life" (we were in the American butt end of existentialism, after all), working just enough hours to finance my writing. As for living, I'd leave that to my apartment-mate. I hitched up to Bennington to visit Malamud one weekend; he came down to Harvard one afternoon while I was working, found the stack of his recently issued novel, *A New Life*, signed them, and as the manager came running over, he pointed to the books and said, "A deposit on Blaise's freedom for the afternoon. Let's beat it." And there I was, on a cool fall day in Harvard Square, walking with the writer I most admired (and still do), answering as best I could *his* questions about me: what did I intend to do with my life? Was I working? Was I happy? What could he do to help?

I do remember, one evening after work in the bookstore, slipping into the Lamont Library, taking out a new notebook and writing a story, "How I Became a Jew" that was literally a transitional story between South and North, as well as a tribute to Malamud. In one sitting; shades of Thomas Wolfe! I had started a novel, "The French and Jewish War," about my parents and I suppose

about myself and twisted loyalties, and most of it was set in Canada. I would be writing it a year later, in Iowa, after the most momentous year in my life. I vomited the night on Dubuque Street in Iowa City when I read through those two hundred typed yellow pages with the big inked number at the top of every page (my God, *me*, at one hundred! At two hundred!!) and then unclipped the pages from the binder I had bought on the first day of Malamud's class at the Harvard Coop, marched outside in the cold, lifted the lid of my garbage can, and ripped it into shreds.

## GREEN VIOLENCE

*Mary di Michele*

For a beautiful evening alone on an avenue  
bordered with nothing but trees  
standing sentinel,  
all grass, each gutter, mined  
with the essence of horsechestnut,  
a smooth brown nut, warm as cognac,  
encased in its green violence.

Some brave squirrels have been at them,  
not deterred by this hedgehog  
of seeds. Scattered everywhere,  
hollowed prickly pods  
and random pieces, apparently sliced,  
wedges of lime rind,  
the fruit gone where? into belly of coon  
or rodent, into shit at the roots.

I've known wind to play  
one leaf more than another,  
a left handed melody  
not composed by nuns,  
that mossy stone of the pubis,  
its music stand.