

INTERLUDE BEFORE AMERICAN LIT

by Michael Ventura

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“None of them knew the color of the sky.” In the first period after lunch, during their last month of high school, I tell my seniors about Stephen Crane... his 1898 story *The Open Boat*, and how its first sentence about the sky keyed the modern tone... that, and how he employed dialogue, and how what he chose not to say was as important as what he said, which was a new way of telling a story... how tragic it was for our literature that Crane died, age 29, so soon after his stylistic breakthrough... how those who would write our most influential literature in the first half of the 20th Century all read Crane in their youth... and how, though you don’t hear Crane mentioned much now, he lived on in everyone influenced by Ernest Hemingway, Willa Cather, and F. Scott Fitzgerald. My seniors are patient with me in their restless way, though most don’t share my passion for the roots of American style. They like the story, and that pleases me. After I grade their writing and pour my late-night whiskey, I raise a glass to Stephen Crane. “Here’s to you, Mr. Crane. I did a little today to repay my debt to you. Go well.”

High school seniors in the spring, in the first period after lunch, lulled by the clement breezes of the San Fernando Valley... they really – but *really* – would rather be anywhere else but behind a desk in class. J. and H. chatter in the back row, as I did when a senior, 42 years ago. Smart kids, full of life. They don’t realize that when I discipline them I’m coming down on the ghost of my young self, it’s a hall of mirrors and I know it and one day they will know it. I interrupt their fun and say:

“J., what’s over?”

“Lunch hour?”

“Childhood.”

“Oooooooooooooo,” says the class, and J. flashes his most winning grin (a grin he’s good at), and I smile in return. And we get back to – who was it that day? – Hemingway. Who wrote, when he was about my age now, “And of all the things you could not have there was one that you could, and that was to know when you were happy and to have all of it while it was there and it was good.”

Why do I teach? Not so they’ll go to college. I don’t much care about that. I want them to have a way to value their happiness. And their unhappiness. And I want, so very much, that they’ll survive. With their sensibilities intact. No matter what happens. I think we’re in for some bad times here in North America, and I want them to come through whole. I know I can give only a little of what they really need. But in the Dark Forest sometimes even bread crumbs help you find your way. I’m dropping bread crumbs and hoping the crows won’t eat them too fast before these beautiful souls find their way. Hemingway, Stephen Crane, Willa Cather, Baldwin, Nate West, may be of assistance. They helped me. I pray they’ll help my students.

I arrive for class an hour or so early, my briefcase bulging with books and attendance sheet and lesson plan and packets of jasmine green tea and my big green cup – a cup presented to me by my seniors two years ago, after the cup I’d used had fallen and cracked. I arrive early to get the feel of their day. Just standing around, a pushing-60 guy with his cup of tea, while the kids cavort through lunch. A teacher has to gauge the atmosphere of their day, its rhythm, its tone... just stand around, at an unobtrusive

distance, and absorb it... sometimes you feel a hectic, manic energy in which your lesson plan just will not fit, and you change what you'd intended so you can sync up with their rhythm... and sometimes, watching them, you receive exactly the idea that will make an impression. *They* give it to you, though they don't know it. No matter the day, you must find a way to meet them. It doesn't matter whether they like you, it doesn't matter whether they like the reading, it doesn't matter what grade their pulling. What matters is: bread crumbs. And the fear of crows. What matters is that you supply a few of them – and you never know which few – with whatever it takes to find their way. So I give them writers who can see in the dark. Hemingway, Crane, Cather, Hurston, Poe, Melville, Hawthorne, Baldwin, Sherwood Anderson, Mark Twain, Fitzgerald, Thomas Wolfe – and Nathanael West, who wrote: “It is hard to laugh at the need for beauty and romance, no matter how tasteless, even horrible, the results of that are. But it is easy to sigh. Few things are sadder than the truly monstrous.”

Reading aloud Wolfe's out-of-print *Only the Dead Know Brooklyn*, about a guy who doesn't know the difference between Brooklyn and a map of Brooklyn. And I say, “We – me and your other teachers – have given you a map. It's a pretty good map. But it's not Brooklyn. I'll say it again. The map we've given you is a *map*. It's not Brooklyn. It's useful – it'll help you know where you are and where you're not – but you'll have to discover Brooklyn for yourselves.

“There are a lot of grad-student types out there running around thinking highly of themselves because they've studied a lot of ‘maps,’ but many confuse the study of maps with actually going anywhere. This guy in Wolfe's story – notice that he uses the map to go somewhere. In other words, he's giving himself an education. The maps are important, but they're not enough.”

My seniors liked Poe. Poe spoke to them in their own language – he was, after all, the first punk. Can't you see Poe now as a modern kid, rapping, tattooed, howling in a garage band? Poe understood that if you liberate the polity (as our Constitution did) something else gets liberated as well, something deeper, scarier, more fundamental – the tell-tale heart. Poe knew that much darkness, as well as light, had been freed from its subconscious confinement by our revolution, and he feared that this freedom would exact a price. It gave him nightmares, but he could see in the dark and he left maps of what he saw.

Hawthorne saw what Poe saw, but his vision was wider: In the liberty of America the adventurous (Hester Prynne) would bloom, but the fearful (Rev. Dimmesdale) would be destroyed, and the repressed (Dr. Chillingsworth) would warp and go bad. Melville thought the American project would sink with all hands, while Whitman (we did Whitman in the 10th grade) saw history as an open road upon which, no matter what befell, the brave could be happy. That word again, “happiness,” the pursuit of it, the American Dream. We never hear of “the English Dream,” or the French or Italian or Peruvian Dream. As though to be an American is to dream and to be stuck there, dreaming – but, alas, only sleepers dream. It may be time to wake up. Interesting that our greatest and most wide-awake literary character, Huck Finn, cheerfully pronounced both civilization and the American Dream an exercise in futility, in which he had no interest. If the proper Widow Douglas was going to Heaven, he'd rather go elsewhere. He frees his friend, the slave Jim, with a jaunty, “All right, then, I'll go to Hell!” It is the noblest moment in American literature. No wonder people still want to ban his book.

American literature... Sherwood Anderson's visions of our loneliness, Willa Cather's "obscure destinies," Fitzgerald's lyrical calibrations of the price of our dreams. Hemingway teaching the necessity of living by one's own code. James Baldwin saying half a century ago, "The world is white no longer and will never be white again." On the first day I gave them a sheet with a Baldwin sentence printed large: "One can only face in others what one can face in oneself."

The childhood of my seniors is ending just as the adolescence of our country is ending. When I'm asked if I have hope I say one thing I know for sure: "The unexpected always happens."

An interlude before class. It's lunch hour and I stand with my cup of tea, in the shade of a tree, and watch from a slight distance these high schoolers. Three play acoustic guitar at a picnic table, others gather and listen. Some fool around, some converse, some read, some play basketball, one practices her softball pitch. D. walks slowly across the grass and asks what I'm doing. I say, "D., how old are you?" "I'll be 18 next January." "That means you're 17." "I guess so." "Well, imagine yourself in 42 years, standing here, watching what we're watching now – a moment of peace, and sanity, and fellowship, a sunlit patch amidst the gathering storm, kid, fragile and beautiful and worth it all." He gives me a little punch on my shoulder, his way of saying, "I get it." And we watch together, a man and a boy somewhere in America, not dreaming, just sort of being.

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