

Steven Harvey

BLUE BOOKS

THE MELANCHOLY NAME says it all. Blue books. Repositories of the memorized self, mementos of all that we have left undone and unlearned, soulless snapshots of the mind. In them we say what others have—more eloquently, more adequately—said, misreading the wisdom of the past to call it our own. Blue indeed. The shadow of our thought. The outline of our ignorance. Hours of reading, underlining, making lists, and formulating handy mnemonics brought to a crisis by twelve pages of white, lined paper wrapped in blue. “Composing at the point of utterance,” I tell my students, quoting one of my teachers. “Bullshit,” they say.

There is the question, passionless and loaded, customarily passed out with the sealed book or stacked in mimeo on the desk and taken nonchalantly by students whose pose of indifference is their last shred of dignity. “Consider,” it insists, “indicate,” or “compare,” speaking of “causes” and “genres” and “sources” and bearing, like the stages of a fatal disease, grizzled names such as “midterm” and “final.” Who knows which instruction is more chilling? Probably “analyze” with all its overtones of breakdown and mental illness. Nearly as treacherous, though, is “discuss”—directionless and apparently open ended, like a swamp—its pits unknown.

“Why do gods appear to Greeks in human form, usually as a friend? *Discuss*, using the appearance of Mentos to Telemachus in the *Odyssey* as a starting point. What relevance does this ancient attitude toward deity have for us today?”

Snapping the seals of their books, my students open to the first page, blink once or twice and stare blankly into their hands. *Discuss*—hmm. The affair begins, a one-night stand for some, a lovers’ spat for a few, and a grovelling and whoring for the rest.

This quarter I taught a class in the oldest building on campus—the room once belonged to the poet Byron Reece, a little-known but important writer from our area who attended the college and later taught

here himself. All autumn I talked about Homer, Dante, and Shakespeare while the palm-shaped leaves of a maple outside my window glowed orange. Plots thickened and leaves, blackening at the edges, curled into brittle fists snapping in the breeze. As literary heroes followed their blood to the ground, gusts cast up a whirl of color—"rust and flame" Reece called the sight—and all that fell came to rest in piles at the feet of desultory students kicking a path back to the dorms. Now, when I am passing out finals, the trees are bare, their brilliance gone.

Julia labors a full fifteen minutes or so over a test that will make up a third of her grade. Her jeans are tight, laced at the ankles. "I guess it takes you forever to get them off," I whisper as she hands in her test. "No," she says brightly—unflappable and without irony—"not at all," and waves goodbye, her perfect brown hair flipping at her shoulders as she dashes down the steps, an incongruous, paisley scarf about her neck blowing off her shoulders like a liquid breeze. A "liquefaction," the poet Robert Herrick called such pretty sights. What could a Julia know about gods and grief?

Several hours later the last Julia hands in her paper and dashes out the door, piling into a convertible filled with screaming classmates. Tires burn rubber as the car squeals once and races down Faculty Drive, the roar of the motor reduced to a mere whispered hiss and eventually to nothing, the young leaving in their wake the fallen bodies of all our dead heroes.

The silence of winter break begins.

My favorite poem by Byron Reece has nothing to do with his usual topics: farming, mountains, and death. Called "In the Corridor," it is about exam day—"a day all dull and dun"—and describes students leaving after taking a final "on the eve of holiday." I like it, in part, because it takes place in this classroom, a room with two doors which face, as the poet writes, "on an open hall" so that "one may go by the way he came or not."

The teacher in the poem, obviously Reece, has had a student read a poem by Herrick aloud from a "ponderous book" and is still "caught in the spell" of the old poet's "youthful music" on a "youthful tongue." Dismissing the class, Reece follows "the laughing lot" into the hallway that offers several choices but, inevitably, points the students away from

him. There is, the poem suggests, a gulf between the young who learn poems and those who have carried them for years in their hearts, and even the one student, shut out from his happy friends by a “grave, unsmiling face,” cannot bridge the gap. The boy turns to see if Reece’s “gaze sought his” and whether the teacher’s mind was

... still for the ageless music of Herrick, or
For the aging day, or the book,
Or for the face at the end of the corridor
And its fleeting backward look.

His mind is, of course, on all these—the poem tells us so—but the words “fleeting” and “backward” are valedictory, the youth taking what he has learned into the corridors of the world, leaving the teacher behind with an ageless book and an aging day.

“Litera scripta manet,” I like to tell my students, “the written word remains,” and, reluctant to check out the script in their blue books, I wander through the empty rows of desks in the classroom reading the graffiti. Looking at these desktops I see the written word also gives us away. “Joint Committee,” one desk declares in bold print, a drawing of a cannabis plant beside it. “Go Nads Go,” shouts another. “I love Tom,” one student writes, “in Florida?” another asks, and “who cares?” adds a third. “Do you have any value of a human life,” a philosopher, composing at the point of utterance, muses incoherently, and an illiterate preacher in the making admonishes us with “you reap what you sew.”

Names. So many names. Kat, Jess, Taylor C, Phantom, Cread, Bonny, Booger, Baby Rich. Names familiar and names strange. One desk is signed, like the Declaration of Independence, by Licker, Pugsley, T.B., NOID, RAID, scammer, and Loggerhead. An anonymous “I” loves Mike and Michelle and Mindy and Miranda and Mark—just to list the “m’s.” There are the obscenities reminding the naive that wastes are still eliminated, fornication continues, and parentage at times is uncertain. Harvey sux, one desk shouts, going into some ugly details on the subject, and English sux, and so—dear God—does Emily Dickinson.

According to these desks, literature is not much on the students’ minds—*they* are on their minds and in their dreams and at each other’s

throats, which is as things should be, but when I head back to my desk, the winter day all dull and dun about me, I feel hollowed out, emptied of them, and very separate from the living, haunted by the fleeting, backward look of names dug in wood. Reece called nostalgia the “sudden recognition of mortality,” and looking at these desks—it’s true—I wish I were dead. Where are Licker, Pugsley, T.B., and NOID? And why am I the punch line of their jokes? Come back Bonny and Booger and Baby Rich. We’re at Loggerheads here, I’m going down, and no RAID, no scammer, can bring the Phantom back to life.

In 1938, when Reece was a student at the college, his teacher and mentor was W. L. Dance—or “Little Man” as the students liked to call him. Dance had heard of Reece before the young poet arrived. “A Reece boy who has already published poems in both *Harper’s* and *Mercury* will be with us next year,” he wrote to one of the members of the Quill, the literary club on campus. When Reece arrived, the Quill took him in.

Dance conducted the group informally, allowing students to sit in a circle and read poems aloud for comment. “The Little Man,” one of the students later wrote, “would be as nice and helpful as he could.” Dance was “the most wonderful and natural teacher I have ever known,” one of the other professors on campus said, adding that it “was Mr. Dance who gave Byron the release he needed so that his infinite mind could range at will and pour itself out in song.” The best kind of teacher, Dance pointed students to a world beyond himself. So, when Ralph McGill of *The Atlanta Constitution* visited the campus asking about Reece, it was Dance who walked the famous editor across the lawn to the shy boy’s room and knocked on the door.

Twenty-seven years later an impoverished and tubercular Reece, now teaching at the college himself, followed the “Little” Man one more time. After grading blue books and setting them in a neat stack in his desk, Reece put Mozart’s “Piano Sonata in D” on the record player and shot himself in the left lung. No doubt his old teacher was on his mind since he chose to commit suicide in the room where Dance—his mentor and his guide—had killed himself ten years before.

Litera scripta manet. Here’s a sobering thought. Almost all that we have of Aristotle comes to us from student notes. The original dialogues

have been lost, and the works that remain are course summaries edited by Aristotle and his followers, Aristotle's original words and the commentary of his students mixed in an impossible tangle. Critics in our century have spent a good deal of time anxiously sorting out who said what in these notes, but Aristotle, I suspect, would not have objected to the muddle.

Aristotle's teaching method, adapted from that of Socrates, was based on dialogue, which is in fact a kind of muddle. Classes at the Lyceum were conducted along a series of walkways allowing the teacher to walk and talk while students trailed along behind. The peripatetic school Aristotle called it, literally, the "walking around school." No one slept in those classes, the idea of "keeping up" taking on a definite meaning. With students literally following in their footsteps, the teachers at the Lyceum had a clear sense of a continuum, a visual image of lives in the service of ideas that are passed on and transposed, the individual self, the leader for now, eventually abandoned along the way.

What after all is dialogue but a letting go of self, our ideas altered, misconstrued, and becoming themselves at the point of someone else's utterance? What is an honest question except a relinquishment of control, the subjection of a cherished belief to the scrutiny of others? *Discuss*, we write and watch our ideas go to gabble in the hopes that one day they may, by the alchemy of discourse, turn to gold. In the *Meno*, Socrates teaches a boy geometry by resisting the urge to explain. Eventually he taught his disciples—and the world—by letting go of his life, and taking his place in the pantheon of pure forms.

In Dante's *Inferno*, the only truly loving portrait of a sinner is Dante's description of his former teacher, Brunetto Latino, the author of the *Tresor*, a book which Dante drew upon to write his works. In the passage, the teacher asks that his sinful life be forgotten and that he be remembered instead for his work, and Dante lets him have his say, crowning him with laurels for that matter, but, it must be remembered, he does put his old teacher in hell, making him run over a scalding desert with other sinners, and—the more telling rejection—he surpasses his teacher's encyclopedia by refashioning the fussy compendium into a masterpiece.

Teaching is the knife. With it we cut the future free and slide to our doom, taking little more than a fleeting backward glance for our re-

ward. What is our legacy? Names scratched onto desks? Words marked and graded and stacked in a drawer? Or something worse—much worse. What do our blue books hide? Oh yes, blue books, I think with a shrug, reminded that the afternoon is late and I haven't graded a single exam yet. Once again I start back to the stack of tests waiting to be marked, running a hand over scarred desktops, when one name in wood catches my eye: Audrey Terry.

Polite, brunette, and angelic, Audry was an English peer tutor at the school in the 1970s. One of the prettiest students ever to attend the college, she probably did more for male literacy on campus than the entire English faculty. Boys flocked to her tutorials. Looking at the name, I see her plainly, the puzzled expression of faint surprise on her face when three boys gathered around her on the way to the dining hall, one boy walking in front trying to get her attention, and she, never coy, but shy, demurring.

I remember, too, a time that she was late for an eight o'clock class with a teacher who was notorious for locking the door at the second bell. Racing across campus, books hugged up to her front, she cut across the lawn, leaping an ankle high chain, but—grace undone—caught her toe and sprawled, unceremoniously, into the grass, books, papers, and beautiful girl brought down hard. Frowning at the wind-blown pages, she got up on her knees—no sense hurrying now, the late bell ringing—and looked sheepishly my way across a decade and a half.

"God does not exist—She happens," I wrote recently to a student who had been struggling with theological questions. My answer took me back to my own student days when, troubled by the question of God's existence, I talked to my Old Testament professor, Phyllis Tribble. Only a little older than we were, Dr. Tribble laughed easily but was, without a doubt, the most intense scholar at the college, speaking with an authority that left us trembling. If anyone had the answers it was this woman who on most days dressed plainly and spoke with the spirit of God.

We met in the snack bar, a small, glass table between us, and her eyes, which in class went from student to student with easy and vague recognition, suddenly gazed at me alone, a dark steady beam.

"I don't believe God exists," I stammered.

"Oh," she said, registering no surprise. She had been through this before. "Which God?"

"Their God. Your God, I guess."

I had taken a philosophy course on the existence of God and knew all the gloomy answers. So I rambled on for half an hour or so about man creating God and other blasphemies. I had wanted her to fight me and had hoped to God that she would win. Wisely, she refused, listening but not arguing. Eventually I said all I knew on the subject and sat before her, silent at last, looking into my folded hands.

Always the teacher, she suggested a list of readings: Blake, Rilke, Langden Gilkey, Kierkegaard, and Martin Buber. She was teaching a course in cosmology the next semester—a seminar for seniors and I was a sophomore—but she would try to get me in. Soon—too soon—it was time to go, but seeing I was still upset, she spoke softly to me. "You've got all the answers," she said, leaning forward, the scholarly robes dropping away from her voice. "Maybe—just maybe—you're asking the wrong questions."

In the *Odyssey*, Athena appears to Odysseus' son, Telemachus, in the disguise of Mentos, a sea captain and family friend from a neighboring town. The disguise is not just to fool the lustful suitors who eat and drink greedily from the family provisions and lust after Penelope. It is for Telemachus, too—Athena's attempt to encourage boldness without frightening the boy. For his part, Telemachus is prepared, ready to leave his childhood behind and meet the best of himself in the form of a goddess who will send him on his own odyssey. While retainers wipe down tables and butcher whole carcasses for roasting, Telemachus, "who dreamed in the crowd" caught the eye of the goddess.

"God does not exist—She happens." It is, I see now, the answer to my essay question.

Eventually I do walk back to my desk and, as the window darkens beside me, work my way through the stack of blue books. The last shall be first, I think, getting to Julia's exam at the bottom of the stack. But what about the first?

Sometimes my life is such a mess that I just fall down and cry. I'm like Penelope with all those suitors and their dirty jokes. Then a friend says something nice and gives me a hug, and the bad stuff just goes away, like that, and as long as the hug lasts I think my friend is Jesus. Sorry that's all I know. I hope it's what you want?

At the bottom of the page she added a postscript: "Merry Christmas."

I thought of the God who was a rabbi and walked among people teaching in parables intended to confuse the mighty and the wise. I thought of Julia, unlacing the legs of her jeans. I thought of a boy set apart from his friends by a sad face and another boy leaving his old answers behind, the voice of a goddess still ringing in his ear. Well, I wondered, reading the blue book again. What *do* I want?

"Damn," I thought, flipping through the empty pages of Julia's blue book, "she got it right," and I gave the answer an A.

Just beyond the maple tree outside my classroom window is a gazebo. Unlike all the other buildings on campus which are named for wealthy benefactors, this airy spot is dedicated by members of the class of 1930 in "loving memory of their teachers." Set among dogwoods and several enormous oaks it is shady during spring and summer and fills each autumn with leaves of flame and rust.

If you walk into it you see in the beams overhead the names of former teachers, some of them still legendary on campus: Dr. J. A. Sharp, Dean Miller, E. L. Adams, Mary Cantrell, Wilma Coleman, S. B. Tolar, and others. Reece is not here, but Dance is, W. L. Dance, the "Little Man." Often I come here, at lunch or in the afternoons, and, as students pass by on their way to classes, take comfort in the names carved in wood overhead. Long after the desks are cleaned of graffiti—new blank slates for new students—the gazebo of teacher's names will remain. It is fitting. Students come and go, armed with our inadequate answers, while we stay behind with a stack of blue books and questions that will not go away.