Bernard Malamud

Dubin's Lives

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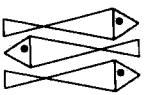

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A limited first edition of this book
has been privately printed

Max and Bertha,
my father and mother

And for
Anna Fidelman

DUBIN'S LIVES

"What demon possessed me that I behaved so well?"

THOREAU

"Give me continence and chastity, but not yet."

AUGUSTINE

One

They sometimes met on country roads when there were flowers or snow. Greenfeld wandered on various roads. In winter, bundled up against the weather, Dubin, a five-foot-eleven grizzled man with thin legs, walked on ice and snow, holding a peeled birch limb. Greenfeld remembered him tramping along exhaling white breaths. Sometimes when one was going longitude and the other latitude they waved to each other across windswept snowy fields. He recalled Dubin's half-hidden face on freezing days when it was too cold to talk. Or they joked in passing. Had he heard the one about the rabbi, who when his sexton prayed aloud, "Dear God, I am nothing, You are everything," remarked, "Look who says he's nothing!" Dubin hoarsely laughed. Once, looking not at all well, he said, "This has to be the center of the universe, my friend." "Where?" "This road as we meet." He stamped his boot as he spoke. Once in passing he said, "Ach, it's a balancing act," then called back, "a lonely business." A minute later: "In essence I mean to say." There were times Dubin handed him a note he read later and perhaps filed. Once the flutist read the slip of paper on the road and tore it up. "What are you doing?" the other shouted. "This I've seen before." Afterward he asked, "Why don't you keep yourself a journal?" "Not for me," the biographer replied. "None of this living for the gods."

They embraced after not meeting for months. Nor was Dubin afraid to kiss a man he felt affection for. Sometimes they wrote when either was abroad—a card might bring a letter, but otherwise now saw little of each other. Their wives weren't friends though they spoke at length when they met. There had been a time when both men drank together on winter nights, and though the talk satisfied, neither was able to work steadily or well the next morning. Eventually they stopped visiting one another and were the lonelier for it. Dubin, as time went by, found it hard to bear the other's growing quietude, and Greenfeld did not that much care for confession. Dubin could stand still, look you in the eye, and say some intimate things. Greenfeld liked not to know all.

Although it isn't yet end of summer, William Dubin in a moment of his walk into the country—rural into pastoral—beats his arms across chest and shoulders as though he had unexpectedly encountered cold, clouds have darkened, a snowstorm threatens. He had, in a way, been thinking of winter.

The biographer had left the house in late-afternoon warm sunshine and had casually walked himself, despite nature's beauty, into a small gloom. He imagined it had come from sensing change in the season, one day to the next. August was a masked month: it looked like summer and conspired with fall; like February it would attempt to hide what it was about. Dubin had uncovered bright-green shoots under dead leaves in February. In the woods today he had spied a flare of red in a broad maple. A sense of short season: Northeast cheat. The days had secretly cast off ballast and were drifting toward autumn. Cold air descended to the roots of trees. The leaves, if you touched, were drying. The noise of bees sucking pale flowers, of crickets rasping, seemed distant. Butterflies, flitting amid trees, flaunted their glad rags a moment before generating and expiring. Dubin felt change and could not bear it. He forbade his mind to run to tomorrow. Let winter stay in its white hole.

Beating his chest he flails at time. Time dances on. "Now I am ice, now I am sorrel." He shakes his useless fist.

Dubin, the biographer, a genial angular middle-aged type with a bulge of disciplined belly—thus far and no farther—and a grizzled head of hair, his head perhaps a half-size small for his height, walked briskly toward a dark-green covered bridge about a mile up the dirt road. His arms and legs were

long; deep chest; shoulders, when he straightened himself, upright. He had gray-blue eyes, a slender long nose, relaxed mouth; he smiled now, touched by a pleasant thought. The mild existential gloom he had experienced in the woods had evaporated; he felt serene, doing his walk. Dubin had a way of breaking into a run when something intensive rose to think of. He was running —marvelous gait for a man of fifty-six. For a minute he shadow-boxed on the road, desisting when a woman in a passing car laughed aloud. He trotted on, enjoying the sweep of space in every direction. He loved the free pleasures of perspective. Fifty yards from the road, a narrow stream, turbulent and muddy after a heavy morning shower, wound through the pasture. To the east rose masses of green trees climbing New York hills; beyond were the looming low Vermont mountains in misty receding planes. Dubin remembered once, in approaching Capri in search of D. H. Lawrence, the hills like a big-breasted woman on her back, raising her head to kiss the sky.

Remembering his work, he unconsciously slowed to a brisk walk. He'd had thoughts while shaving that he ought to try developing a few notes for an autobiographical memoir—type a page or two to see if they came to life with texture, heft. Or do it the way Montaigne did—you start an essay and thus begin an examination of your life. "Reader, I am myself the subject of my book; you would be unreasonable to spend your leisure on so frivolous and vain a matter." His smile turned into snicker when he foresaw Kitty's judgment: "Why bother when there are so many unusual lives to write about?" She'd be right although any man speaking truthfully about his life should be worth reading. Still, no sense thinking about it until he had completed the Lawrence he was, after years of research, about to start writing. "My God, whatever brought me to him?" After several steps he ran on, a little in fright.

He was running lightly, forearms loosely lifted, watching a wheeling flight of birds—grackles?—when an orange VW with a battered door and a soiled cracked windshield—it looked as though it had passed through the bird flight —roared out of the covered bridge, came to a halt, abruptly started forward, at last pulled jerkily to a stop at Dubin's side. He felt a flash of recognition on beholding the driver but it came to nothing: she was a stranger.

The young woman begged his pardon in a voice he would surely have remembered, vaguely drawing down her skirt over bare thighs. She was braless, her face attractive; he had noticed a few darkish blond hairs on her chin. Her loose fair hair she wore long; the well-formed sturdy body was feminine, appealing. A half-eaten yellow pear lay on the seat beside her but

if she had enjoyed the fruit it no longer showed. The girl's curious eyes, he thought, were uneasy, as if she was staring at last night's dream instead of only good-willed Dubin. She wore wire-framed blue-tinted glasses that muddied her green irises, he saw when she removed them. Her smile was nervous, mouth sour in repose. From habit he tried to imagine her past but made no headway. Her first glance at him had seemed tight, as though she was calculating whether his visible interest went beyond what the moment required; or she wanted not to be quickly read by anyone who could possibly read; then her focus shifted, gaze eased; she asked if she was on the right road to town. She had, out of the window, touched his arm.

Dubin, pleased by the gesture, pointed a helpful finger in the direction he had come. "Take the left of the fork."

The girl nodded. This was no comfortable lady despite nature's favor of an impressive body and on-the-verge-of-beautiful face. Whatever she had she seemed to want less of. He was about to walk on but she was still unsure where to go. Dubin gave her a good word: "A lovely day." He was a deep-voiced man with a tentative laugh.

"Some would say so."

"Not you?"

She did not reply.

"Be kind to yourself." He had stammered as a child, and the impulse to on occasion converted itself into a mild hoarseness of expression, sometimes a self-conscious laugh. Dubin cleared his throat.

She gave him an almost sullen look.

"Why do you say that?"

A man behind them, in an Oldsmobile with Jersey plates, honked to pass. "Whyn't you make love in bed?"

The girl burst into a nervous laugh.

Dubin told her he had no idea and hurried on.

It later occurred to him that the disquiet lady had been wearing a Star of David on a thin gold chain around her neck. If they had spoken names might they have touched lips?

Ah, Dubin, you meet a pretty girl on the road and are braced to hop on a horse in pursuit of youth.

There he stood by the tree that had wounded him.

The blow on the head and broken bones were not the wound; they had

evoked the wound, he had thought a minute after his car had struck the tree —the aftermath when one cursed himself for suffering the wound. Dubin had tramped through the booming bridge, where the muddy stream turned west and he east, and was again at the point of the road he still shunned, twenty feet from the highway: it had iced up during a freezing late-fall rain last year and Dubin, on a trivial morning errand—a container of milk Kitty had forgotten to buy—slid into an accident. His thoughts had hardly changed. The car spun like an arrow on a board and the biographer—as if trying to foretell the future: what begins with a wound?—had struck a tree, the last lining the road—another foot and he'd have skidded to a stop in the dead grass.

He had not at first felt pain as blood streamed down his face. He had stumbled to the highway waving his left arm, the other cracked at the wrist, bloody nose broken, right knee cut. It had seemed to him hours before anyone stopped to pick him up. Three drivers had seen him and sped by—"Fools!" Dubin had cried in astonishment. She who had stopped for him was a girl in her late twenties in a red Pinto, on her way to work. He had felt ashamed to be bleeding in her car. It was years since he had seen his own blood flowing and he wondered if it was a portent; but nothing came of it except a week of pain and a mild depression for not being able to work.

Through his bleeding nose he could smell her incisive blooming perfume. Some responses have no respect for circumstances, characteristic of Dubin.

He told her his name. "I'm a biographer." And laughed embarrassedly. "Sorry to be messing your upholstery."

"It'll wash off—do you feel much pain?"

"Curiously not. I will, I'm sure."

"I'm Betsy Croy."

"Charmed. What do you do?" Dubin asked her, mopping with his handkerchief the blood dripping down his head. Better to talk.

"I bookkeep. What did you say you do?"

"Write lives—Mark Twain, Thoreau—others." He smiled foolishly; she didn't know the name.

Betsy drove awhile in concentrated silence, then said hesitantly, "I married this boy from my high school class when we graduated. Now he's twenty-eight and has got impotent."

"A shame," Dubin replied. "The composer Mahler was helped in similar

circumstances by a long walk with Freud in Leiden—that's in Holland. If he hasn't already, your husband ought to talk to a doctor."

"He has but it did no good." She said nothing more.

Dubin was moved to offer his services but surely not now; he bled quietly.

Afterward he had stupidly forgotten to thank her, express heartfelt gratitude for her kindness; he had wanted to send her flowers. Dubin had visited the State Police, hoping her address might appear on the accident report. It did not. Occasionally he dreamed of her. He had for an instant thought this was she whom he had just met on the road; she was another.

The bark of the oak had been obscenely skinned for months after he had hit it. Although an accident on the road was sooner or later almost certain, given the hard wintry weather and frequency of mishap, Dubin had felt insulted by fate. A year later he would still not look at the tree as he walked or drove by.

He ran across the highway when traffic let up, wobbling as his arthritic knee tightened, and limped a minute after entering a theoretically hard-topped road—subject to winter potholes, spring mud—then went on with his country walk. Dubin thought of it as circular although it was in fact an irregular quadrilateral on the county map. He strode on at a steady pace, refreshing his lungs, exhaling with pleasure. He had put this walk together years ago—the long walk—and his route rarely varied. The short walk went to the bridge and back, about a mile each way. He left by the kitchen door; across the back lawn into a grove of tall gray-trunked silver maples with slender sharp-pointed leaves—gave the elegant effect of elms but less lyric, more grandeur—through a broad field with a pliant path he had worn into it; then, past the old barn, into the sunlit, still, pine-scented wood, drama of white birch with evergreen; in addition, sugar maples, aspen, ash. Kitty called it "Kitty's Wood" because she'd been in it first; explored it while he was unpacking his books after they'd moved into the house. And then up the road to the covered green bridge.

The walk he was into now Dubin estimated an additional four miles, the whole taking about an hour and a half or three quarters, unless he hurried. The way not to hurry—to enjoy nature, not suffer obsession—was to go the short walk; but sometimes he hurried the long. He felt he was taking his time today when he had the thought—sensation—that the road was coming at him counterclockwise—moving as though the journey hastened its end.

Dubin's mind ran ahead of itself. What's my hurry to get back? What must I do that I haven't done? The truth was he hadn't meant to take the long hike today and was probably hitting it up unconsciously; he had meant at the bridge to turn back but walked on remembering his accident. And Betsy Croy.

As he hastened on he warned himself to be attentive to what's present, namely nature. If you looked without seeing, the walk was more of the same —the same subjectivity. The good of it beyond exercise was that it changed the mind's scenery after a day's work. He felt uneasy when not observing—the big ones missed nothing, had eyes that remembered. Thoreau: "The perception of beauty is a moral test." More test than moral but one ought to look. The road came at him in slow motion—he tried to explain it but couldn't. What's happening today that hadn't yesterday? Only this moving road, a device of time hurrying me home. Dubin runs to do what's next. The way to counteract forgetting to look was to join up—take courage in both hands, move your ass off the confining road, be involved. Hop a wall; follow a stream through pasture—what's so sacred about private property when it's all God's earth? Walk up a hill; enter sunlit wood; swim bareass in a pond reflecting day's eye. Walk home wet in dry clothes.

When had such happened lately? He could count the times on one finger. I rarely leave this road. Now and then a picnic under Sunday-evening trees. Sometimes I cut in along an old path to the pond in the quarry. Wild flowers scattered in clusters along the way. Once, with Kitty, we climbed Mt. No Name with the kids—walked up the low north flank. They'd been summer people who had stayed on. City people—Dubin from Newark and Bronx tenements, Kitty originally from Montreal; she had also lived in Augusta, Maine, with her grandmother. Dubin, after a decade and a half in Center Campobello, could recognize and name about twenty trees, a half dozen bushes, fifteen wild flowers, a handful of birds. He followed the flight of a crow elated to know who was flying. He had slowly learned to look, name things of nature. When he passed a flower he told himself to take it all in. What he couldn't name, or when names slipped his mind, he asked Kitty. She saw the flower whole—corolla, stalk, the shape of its leaves. He felt for a moment bereft.

In sum, William Dubin, visitor to nature, had introduced himself along the way but did not intrude. He gazed from the road, kept his distance even when nature hallooed. Unlikely biographer of Henry David Thoreau—I

more or less dared. Even in thought nature is moving. Hunger for Thoreau's experience asserted itself. Besides, great men are men; a genius in doubt is a man in doubt—I got close to his human nature. Thoreau gave an otherwise hidden passion and drew from woods and water the love affair with earth and sky he'd recorded in his journals. "All nature is my bride." His biographer-to-be had been knocked off his feet on first serious encounter with nature, a trip to the Adirondacks with a school friend when they were sixteen. Before that he had hungrily sought signs—promises?—of the natural world on city streets and found, in walks out of his neighborhood, private houses with flowers on lawns; hedges; trees; and the dead leaves he was surprised to find in summertime. As a young man he had lived much in public parks; had sought, if not his bride, his bride's cousin? The first time in the mountains had turned him on in the manner of the Wordsworthian youth in "Tintern Abbey": "The sounding cataract haunted me like a passion." Dubin, haunted, had been roused to awareness of self extended in nature, highest pitch of consciousness. He felt what made the self richer: who observes beauty contains it. One is stabbed by the miraculous creation and interwoven whole. He wanted nature to teach him—not sure what—perhaps to bring forth the self he sought—defined self, best self? Nature compelled him to feel what he hadn't felt so well before: "the shaping force," Hardy called it. He never forgot this although the experience, infrequently renewed, had diminished as youth had. My God, how nature moved me. Now "that time is past," as Wordsworth had felt it. Now, on the whole, in varying moods Dubin looked at scenery, and scenery, in varying moods, looked at him. But in his heart he still expected something he could not define. If you dared look you earned seeing. Dubin did his walks in nature's presence.

Still, what nature had meant to him, though not only nature, had inspired him to undertake and ultimately complete a fine life of H. D. Thoreau. In his mind he flipped through pages: close portrait of the solitary sensuous man, privately wounded, who lived on wonder, observed the bald fact and spun metaphor and myth out of nature. In his writing he celebrated his consciousness identified with the Absolute. *Walden* was a lied of death and song of resurrection: Thoreau had it both ways. Now and then someone argued the book was not literally true; it was fictitious: In truth, the man went home often to see his mama. If so, Dubin thought, it was nonetheless a masterpiece, nonetheless inspiring. It had stirred the imaginations of Proust and Yeats. How can it be less than it is? You write sentences and men are

sensibly affected. Dubin, proud of the biography, contemplated with confidence his present work on D. H. Lawrence. Do the primitive labyrinth of the man, mystic flame-boiled essence, bloody simple human self.

He warned himself then as he often did, although it came to not much, that a good writer adventures beyond the uses of language, or what's there to put into words? Yet the truth is some do not: of them Dubin is one. As though to make up for his limitations, from his pants pocket he dug out one of his impulsive notes to himself: "Everybody's life is mine unlived. One writes lives he can't live. To live forever is a human hunger."

He was running. As the road dipped the hills rose. In spring light-green foliage raced up the rumpled hills and by June covered the scabrous shoulders of the mountains. Dubin trotted on the road going south. In the distance white clouds moving above patches of sunlight on the hills. The land sloped up to a line of trees advancing on him like a marauding army. For a while the wood rode on his head. Dubin rose on the road as the hills sank; he settled into a fast walk. A sparse quarter mile of old houses went by as on a rusty turntable, then broad fields with now and then a stark farmhouse, upright and spare to a point of principle—with weather-beaten barns, red or black silos, Angus and Herefords on cow paths in the pasture. Dubin liked to come by on rainy late-afternoons to see the steaming swollen-uddered cows lying in the wet waiting to be milked. When he passed in light fog, the ripe hot smell of cow dung from a barn nearby assailed him across the field—he knew where he was. One night, driving the road alone, he saw a cow cropping grass in moonlight. The farmland around gave pleasure: each neat walled field, each shifting shade of brown beige and green; furrowed, cultivated, harvested, plowed under: order of uses of men, animals, seasons eternal.

Robert Frost and his doomed brood had lived a summer on one of the farms not far away, and Dubin, long after the fact, had talked with his neighbors in Vermont and written an article: "Frost, the Season of His Wife's Death." The poet had been hard on her. His will, it had been said, could tolerate no other wills around. "Elinor has never been any earthly use to me." She had kept him from her bedside while she was dying. He waited in the corridor, saw her only when she was asleep, unconscious; dead. He'd had no last word from her. Her defense was silence. "She was not as original as I in thought but she dominated my art with the power of her character and nature." Dubin occasionally visited their anguished grave in a churchyard a dozen miles away. They were together now in the vault under the

tombstone; their ashes were, with the remains of those of their children who were not buried elsewhere, although all their names were incised on the stone. "There's only one subject for a poem," Frost had said. Dubin had laid a small white stone on the marble tombstone.

The biographer had once wanted to do a full-length life of the poet and had written him a letter requesting a talk if he was interested. But the old man wrote back he had already chosen someone "to preserve my immortal remains." "I'd rather be in the hands of a man whose spit I'd seen." Dubin, after going through her papers in the N.Y. Public Library, had considered the life of Virginia Woolf, whose intelligent imagination and fragile self had drawn him to her; but her own nephew, Quentin Bell, was already into a biography of her. Dubin had then thought of D. H. Lawrence, a complex type with tormented inner life, if that's who you felt you had to get involved with.

Thinking of the biographies he had written, in particular *Short Lives* in a single volume, he felt a sadness come into him. Completed, most lives were alike in stages of living—joys, celebrations, crises, illusions, losses, sorrows. Some lives accomplished much, some very little. One learned, as he wrote, the arcs, forms, consequences of the flight of lives. One learns where life goes. In fact he led them there. When you know the end the rest moves up only too quickly. Therefore, Dubin, what's on your mind? That he was about to create a new life would in the end shorten his own? When the work was done he was that much older—more serious matter than a decade ago. He had sacrificed to his labors that many hours, that many years. Prufrock had measured out his life with measuring spoons; Dubin, in books resurrecting the lives of others. You lost as you gained; there's only one subject for a poem.

The last part of the country walk went west before it turned south again on an upward pitch to the highway, a length of solitary shaded road heavily wooded on both sides. Overhead, lightly laced branches touched and intertwined. The road was cool in the green shade, the air fragrant. Dubin breathed. He tramped on in the light-green dark. No sound except him walking along thinking his thoughts. At one place on the deserted road he broke into a run. He had more than once encountered a dog racing at him across a field, or bursting out of the woods, teeth bared, growling in its belly. His response was sternly to say, "Go home, boy," and hope for the best. Mostly they wandered away as he walked on; but he feared meeting an animal with no respect for human language. A black German shepherd had

all but treed him once—his back against a tree, the hound snarling when Dubin attempted to inch forward. He'd been trapped a mad long time but kept the dog off by talking to it, his heart where it needn't be, telling it the story of his life. At last it yawned and trotted off. In afterthought it had seemed that a cardinal's shrill call, sounding much like a man whistling for his dog, had sent the animal on his way. Dubin waved to the invisible red bird in the trees. He's been set running by the thought of the dog and was running now. "Why, then, should man hasten as if anything less than an eternity were allotted for the least deed?" Who says?

As he ran, the road had stopped moving and he slowed to a walk. A reddish-brown bitch followed him, a shaggy Irish setter who sometimes appeared, a friend of the people. Ahead, where the bushes rose fifteen feet high on one side of the road, and the trees moved into the downsloping wood on the other, he observed a moving figure. It was Greenfeld in white cap and shirt, ambling along. He often carried his flute or recorder and would play as he walked. Dubin would hear a song in the trees. The flute got gut-close to primitive lament. "Ach, ich flöte." Greenfeld did one thing and did it well, not a bad way to live a life. Not now in a mood to listen or be listened to —he felt a hunger for solitude—the biographer stepped behind a tree until the flutist had passed by.

Some other time.

He was looking at a grove of evergreens below—a pleasure to gaze down at the pointed tops of trees—and a little farther on turned as the road grew level and approached the highway. Soon country merged into village, not a charming sight. After departing the highway Dubin walked north on an old sidewalk of broken slate. Center Campobello was a town of 4,601 souls in New York State, almost a mile from the Vermont border. He had lived there fifteen years, unknown to most: Wm. B. Dubin, who wrote lives, and who, it said in *Newsweek*, had once received a medal from President Johnson. There was a picture of them shaking hands. He recalled the clutch of the man's big paw. At the courthouse he turned and walked toward a crimson sunset until he came to the edge of town: his three-story yellow clapboard house with black shutters and wrought-iron widow's walk on the roof. A porch with white pillars ran half the length of the rear of the house. Dubin began his daily walk at the back door and returned from it, as from a journey, by the front.