

THAT THE FRAGMENTS MAY COHERE

By Michael Ventura

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"The piano concerto is over, and so many didn't make it. I hope when you're creative you don't meet the hag." The words are my brother Aldo's, spoken from yet another pay phone in yet another mental ward -- on Staten Island, a ferry ride from Ellis, where our grandparents entered this country 90-ish years ago. "All ages are contemporaneous in the mind," Ezra Pound once said, and so I see Maria and Antonio and Vincenzo and Giovanna disembark at Ellis, each in a different year, and all of them look toward Staten where one mad grandson speaks across hundreds of miles to another about the hag ... speaks those words and then hangs up. Aldo turned 50 last September and this is more-or-less his 50th incarceration since he was 19. It's one of the worst. Physically as well as mentally ill, with ailments that cannot be cured, it's as though he has finally broken into many fragments. All the fragments are Aldo, but nothing holds them together anymore. You can hear the struggle and strain in his voice, trying to hold the fragment of the moment, but he can't; it breaks off uncontrollably from his concentration, and he hovers a little, baffled and furious at not being able to be himself, and then he hangs up. He can hold a fragment for a few sentences, sometimes for a couple of minutes, but no longer. It's as though he's become a choppily cut movie with all the takes out of sequence -- there are no scenes anymore, just scraps of footage.

The hag. It may be a solace to him that I know what he's talking about. Perhaps you know too. The tellers of the old fairy tales knew the hag and described her well: She comes (and she can be a he) sometimes in our dreams, sometimes in our work, sometimes in ways we have no words for, to test and then to destroy or guide us, depending on our strength and our luck and on how she's feeling that day. She is but one manifestation of something Aldo's twin, Salvatore, told me on my last birthday: "You have to understand that you are much more complex an entity than any idea you can have about yourself."

What Aldo *can* do these days is make collect telephone calls, leave collect messages -- sometimes 20 and 30 a day fill up my machine. I think it's because the telephone receiver in his hand helps him concentrate himself into some version of himself for a few moments. If I listened to all the messages I might end up where he is, so I just erase most of them; every few days, when I'm cohering especially well, I call back, we talk a few moments, he hangs up. I try and fail again to imagine the cavernous loneliness he feels when he turns from the phone to walk back and forth through those hopeless hallways of incoherence.

And then I take a little stroll around the apartment, in my own effort to cohere. I look at the various photographs, on various walls, of family and friends, living and dead; I seek out my wife, to speak a few soft words, or if Hannah's asleep I stand in the dark and watch over her sleep. It is not a feeling of dazement or depression. It's sweeter. I'm looking at the bounty of my life, grateful and heartbroken. I'm done with survivor-guilt -- my brother does not want me to succumb to the hag. The point, always, is to live. To value joy. To do what you can. To fight when you have to and to sing when you want to. And ... to let yourself *be* sung, for it may be that something is singing us.

I often end up at the refrigerator. Our fridge, like many, is stuck all over with all sorts of things. Taped to the left side is a poem Robert Bly inscribed to Hannah and me

shortly after our wedding. It ends: "My heart is a calm potato by day, and a weeping/Abandoned woman by night. Friend, tell me what to do,/Since I am a man in love with the setting stars." On the front is a postcard from Terry Allen, on which he made a comical but telling drawing of last year's fires in New Mexico. And another that Deborah Milosevich sent, a Fifties couple in a car on Route 66, her way of saying that there's (almost) always a way to get from here to there. Another card Big Boy Medlin gave me: Doc Pomus, the great songwriter, bearded and smoking a cigar, giving sage advice: "Never hip a square." (I became a better or at least a more honest writer when I stopped trying to hip the squares. Squares are squares because they wanna be, or because they're too afraid to be anything else, and it's best we all go on our merry ways.) And there's a scrap of newsprint about the schedule of ferries to Ellis Island; I haven't been back since it was renovated, but I mean to go and walk where my grandparents walked, and thank and honor them for their audacity.

Another bit of newsprint: "TODAY IN BASEBALL: 1918 -- Casey Stengel, after having been traded by Brooklyn in the offseason, made his return to Ebbets Field a memorable one. In his first at-bat, Stengel called time, stepped out of the batter's box and doffed his cap. A bird flew out and the fans broke into laughter."

A napkin is taped near that, with two inscriptions. In Hannah's hand, a note to me: "I'm your metaphysical piece of candy." Oh yeah. And in my hand, what the writer of *Babylon 5*, J. Michael Straczynski, relates as an ancient Egyptian prayer: "May God stand between you and harm in all the empty places where you must walk." (The emptiness of Aldo's hallways.)

And a fridge magnet of a smiling Marilyn Monroe shortly before her death, which holds up a yellow sheet that Hannah printed out with her computer:

"The Five Remembrances of the Buddha. 1 -- I am of the nature to grow old. There is no way to escape growing old. 2 -- I am of the nature to have ill health. There is no way to escape having ill health. 3 -- I am of the nature to die. There is no way to escape death. 4 -- All that is dear to me and everyone I love are of the nature to change. There is no way to escape being separated from them. 5 -- My actions are my only true belongings. I cannot escape the consequences of my actions. My actions are the ground on which I stand."

Peace and happiness, the Buddha taught, are impossible unless we remember and accept these five principles.

And taped much later to the bottom of that page (and not in mockery, believe me), these four sterling words: "What would Xena do?"

Do you know that blind children make paintings too? Hannah is a teacher of very little blind children, and taped to the right side of the fridge is a painting by Reina (it means "queen" in Spanish), a vibrant, intelligent, courageous child. Blind children paint with textures, gluing "stuff" -- macaronis, buttons, bits of things -- to the page in a kind of 3-D collage. Reina's painting wonderfully reminds me to do what I can, what I love. On her first visit to our apartment, this seven-year-old demanded to touch everything in every room. She wouldn't let anything go until she'd mastered it. She taught herself to open and close the couch that unfolds into a bed. There's a closet I never managed to shut all the way -- it wouldn't latch. I chalked that up to the building being so old. Reina wouldn't settle for that explanation. She kept pushing and slamming and working that door until it closed properly. May God stand between Reina and harm in all the darkened places where she must walk.

Reina has had to learn in her bones, absolutely and years before she has the words for it, that her actions are her only true belongings. "What's your work?" "I'm a writer." "Where are your pens?" "In my shirt pocket." And she felt her way around the dining room table to where I sat, and felt the three pens in my shirt pocket. "I'm a writer." "Where are your pens?" Excellent question.

I really do write these pieces in the wee hours -- the night shift is my natural habitat. From this desk I can see out the window into a wide alley. And tonight I saw fire. There's a coven of kids next door, performers of some kind. They sport elaborate tattoos, they throw loud parties, and make love ostentatiously -- that is, loudly -- and I silently cheer them on. They are decidedly not squares, and one day, when their tattoos have smudged and spread with age, they will have a youth worth remembering, and in that we are comrades, though they don't know it. Two of them, a boy and a girl, have somehow made a circle of fire in the alley, and they are juggling flaming wands. It's wonderful -- and it's late enough so that our sleeping neighbors won't call the cops. One of them walks on stilts, throwing fire high over his (or her, I can't tell) head, and the swiftly moving fire-glow is intoxicating to me. I watch this as I light another cigarette and drink another whiskey. May they not meet the hag this night -- though if you're playing with fire you're bound to learn something about the hag. One day the dream starts dreaming you. And then you find out what you're made of. May your fragments cohere -- for long enough to say, to do, something real.

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