

CHAOS IN THEIR EYES

By Michael Ventura

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On my way for the first time to Steve Erickson's apartment, some 15 years ago, I had the sudden out-of-nowhere thought that it had been a very long time since I'd listened to the Miles Davis-Gil Evans recording *Sketches of Spain*. It had once been a significant piece of music for me, and I briefly wondered why I had drifted so far from it, did I even still own it? Then, navigating traffic, I forgot about it again. When Erickson opened his door to my knock the music playing in his apartment was *Sketches of Spain*. He hadn't listened to it in a long time, but felt the impulse to put it on just before I arrived. (There is agony and challenge and depth-of-soul in that music, and not a little unadmitted sappiness, presented with not a little unabashed pretension -- and you can make of that what you will.) Steve took to calling such psychic conjunctions "Venturaesque," because he thinks (or at least says) that I make too much of such things -- though precisely such fateful linkages are *all over* his novels, which are not Venturaesque at all but thoroughly Ericksonian. Our friendship quickly deepened until we became, in a way, related -- as brothers are. For as writers we were birthed by the same sense of mission: that our self-expression had value only as the vehicle of our understanding of, and confrontation with, an uncompromised and dangerous beauty without which the word "America" would mean only "empire."

We even became occasional characters in each other's novels -- which is to say, we somehow became works of each other's imaginations. And so we grew to have a large stake in the triumphs and failures of each other's art.

We met through the value we placed on each other's words, yet our writing is as different in style as our lives. His novels are intricately crafted and plotted, mine tend to sprawl and build upon one digression after another; his living quarters are meticulously neat, mine are casually chaotic; his essays are formal in the best sense, with long graceful sentences directed toward complex clarities in which the whole is more than the parts, while mine ramble like conversations (or letters) in which the parts usually make more sense than the whole; he knows and values more about contemporary culture than I'd ever want to, while I cultivate niches (20th-century Russian poets, for instance) that he's never heard of; he can eat rich desserts without evident ill effect, while for me dessert equals gas and lots of it. Still our writings stare into the same abysses and we sing the same dirge for an America that was forsaken before it ever truly began, an America in which Walt Whitman wheels a shopping cart filled with crushed Coke cans through the alleys as Emily Dickinson struts in an out-of-fashion mini at the mini-mall singing (as she really did), "I do resign the prig/And ten of my once stately toes/Are marshaled for a jig!" -- while Sally Hemmings' bones reveal the excruciating paradoxes in Jefferson's DNA. Our passion for the *original* American dream has led us both to become what neither of us set out to be: bards of ruin, salvagers of fragments, connoisseurs of catastrophe, attempting to jury-rig a collective salvation from the serrated shards of intimate revelations.

(Warning to young writers: *This can't be done*. Now, go do it.)

Something else that Steve and I share as writers is that the American literary establishment wants nothing to do with either of us -- a source of both pain and pride. Oh yes, and this: Every character in his novels and every character in mine, though different

in almost every way, has a glint of chaos in their eyes; their stories begin *after* they've been exposed to so much chaos that it has, in a way, possessed them; and their unadmitted mission is both to somehow contain that chaos and to pass it on, so as to undermine the Empire through their very presence.

I am writing this tonight by way of celebration. See, my latest novel, four years in the writing, was rejected (boohoo, boohoo) by seven publishers and is likely never to see the light of day ... but that's why I'm practically giddy with a sense of shared victory, even more than I otherwise might have been, because, against all odds, Steve's latest and finest book, *The Sea Came In at Midnight*, has just been reissued in paperback. In hardback it disappeared without a ripple, but resurrected as a paperback it waits in ambush in your bookstore -- a wild read for anyone who can stand to have their inner mirrors shattered so as to better grasp that their cherished notions of "self" may be nothing more than a self-inflicted but culturally coerced dream, and that to wake from that dream is our only possible liberation from history.

No small theme, that.

The Sea Came In at Midnight does not lend itself to summary -- and anyway, this ain't a book review. The tale isn't so much labyrinthine as it is, itself, a labyrinth. What occurs on each page is utterly clear, understandable, and distinct; but to turn almost any page is to turn a corner, not at the 90-degree angle of which corners are usually constructed, but at angles for which there are no numerical equivalents. Yet gradually, page after page, angle after angle, the edifice of the whole becomes more clear than you might wish. Erickson teaches that the New Millennium is not something outside of you, on a calendar (and calendars are pivotal in this tale); it's not something you can point at, mark, and date; rather, the New Millennium is inside you, and has yet to be recognized, much less encountered and lived. Where you come from may not be discoverable, but where you're going is unavoidable -- unless your eyes of chaos can look without evasion into another's. That is the act that rips all calendars off all walls, and leaves you in the only time that matters: Now.

And what time is Now? Steve says: "Time for a personal act of revolt. Time to throw your oh-so-highly intellectualized sense of chaos into a true chaos of the heart and senses."

This is how my friend describes your world and mine: "No one wanted to calm down, the spectacular disintegration of everything was too exhilarating, and now everyone existed just to be exhilarated." That's a world where those who don't remember their dreams may be sleepwalkers enmeshed in a dream that's bigger than they are. "The expression of a spiritual chaos no politics could address."

This is how, in our fantasy-entrapped desperation, some eyes-of-chaos grasp for love: "I want you at the end of your rope, lashed to the mast of my dreams." (That's the first sentence of *The Sea Came In at Midnight*.)

And it seemed the most unrelenting voice in my head was speaking when I read:

"Let's say I'm a monster. Let's say I was never capable of love. Let's say down in the pit of my soul, beyond whatever I tried to convince myself I believed, everything was always about surrender and control ... Let's say I never really believed in anything but myself. Let's say my soul was so impoverished I never really believed in anything but my appetites, because of all the things I've felt, appetite was beyond my control. This assumes I ever really believed there was a soul to be impoverished. Let's say from the first moment of my life, everything's always been about me and nothing else ..."

Writing lesson: Dig how Erickson takes a pale word like "really" and makes it carry the weight of a frightened, despairing self-knowledge that no fancier word could grasp.

But quoting out of context makes his tale seem abstract. It's not. This is a novel about lost children. Every single person in it, whatever their age, is conscious of being a lost child; and those characters who've conceived and borne children, have lost their children (Remind you of anybody?). Steve's tale is one of children searching for parents, parents searching for children, and the test is whether they will recognize each other again when, after long years, by chance they finally meet. Remind you of anybody?

The conceit of my and Steve's generation, and perhaps of any generation, is that though we might be lost, our children need not and would not be. Ha. We believed this because we located our lostness in the mistakes of our parents rather than where it really is: the collapse of the meaning of history. Which is the collapse of the meaning of memory. Which means, in part, that no generation can pass on its sense of history to the next. Which is another grand theme of *The Sea Came In at Midnight*.

Have you listened to *Sketches of Spain* lately?

Buy my friend's book. Be attentive. Turn the pages slowly. "It's the kind of violation one waits for his whole life, without knowing he's been waiting for it."

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