

REVERIES

By **MICHAEL VENTURA**

November 16, 2012

The expression “falling into reverie” is not accurate. “Slide” is more like it. You slide into a reverie, sort of from the side. It’s not an ordinary memory. It’s that, in a sudden but gentle way, I go to a place of the past that feels completely present: I’m there and here. And this state sustains itself for a bit, until the teapot whistles or the phone rings.

It’s not grammatical to begin and end paragraphs with ellipses, but that punctuation conveys a kind of sliding. In reverie, I go here and there...

...a trailer in the middle of nowhere. Butch and Janette are still asleep. For some reason, I turn on the TV (it gets three Amarillo channels). There’s *Sesame Street*: Two cartoon panels, illustrated. Together they say: “‘Life is strange,’ said Jeremy. ‘Compared to what?’ said the spider.” I smile and turn off the TV. I open the trailer door into bright spring sunlight, a Texas Panhandle spectacle: rolling chaparral, horizon to horizon, east to west. The chaparral’s scents are strong and sweet. I step outside and idly walk toward the quarry. The overwhelming sky extends from forever down to my feet. Suddenly, overhead, a sound – a rush of musical, feathery whispering, so very wonderful. Raw joy overtakes me so completely that I’m not even me. I’m that sound. I look up. It’s a flight of mud wrens – but I don’t know this until I look up. When I see that I’m hearing birds’ wings, I’m sort of me again. I walk toward where the mud wrens flew. I stand on the cliff above the quarry. Below, in a small valley, runs the narrow, shallow Salt Fork of the Red River. I’m me again, but the sensation of being not-me is fresh – a moment that felt like I was lifted into flight. A moment only, when I was 28, but, the older I get, that moment returns and returns...

...a rooftop in Brooklyn: 1286 Decatur Street. To be poor, really poor, is to be very hungry sometimes and a little bit hungry all the time. To be really poor is to be 11 years old and to see the helplessness in your mother’s eyes because she can’t properly feed you – and nothing scares you more than helplessness in your mother’s eyes. Even the big boys who rape you in the public bathroom in Halsey Street Park don’t scare you that way. Being beaten by bullies doesn’t scare you that way. You have a weapon against bullies. They want you to say, “I give, I give --I surrender.” But that is the one thing you won’t say. Your dignity, and the dignity of your family, depends on that one thing: You will not say, “I give.” You get beat, but you don’t surrender. And you’re very hungry sometimes and a little hungry all the time. And the only place you feel free is on the roof of 1286 Decatur Street. You don’t understand anything. You don’t understand why your father abandons you. You don’t understand why your mother is helpless or why you must be hungry. But you understand never to say, “I give.” You understand that crying does no good. You understand that cockroaches and fevers are inescapable. And you go to the rooftop to read books by Andre Norton, Robert Louis Stevenson, and books about astronomy that you don’t understand. From that rooftop you see a city of rooftops like yours. With no ability to formulate the idea, you know you own only this: the look in your eyes. On this rooftop, you learn the world is wide. Wider than your life. You can’t put it into words, but you know it. You go to the rooftop every chance you get. It feels something like freedom – a place to go where you can feel, but not yet say, what you

know. And you know that there is one sin that will not be forgiven: to forget that you are one of the poor. You take that knowledge with you always. Whatever you become, wherever you go, you are the 11-year-old on that rooftop who knows, without being able to say it, that what he has, and all he has, is the look in his eyes. To that roof I return and return...

...another rooftop, in West Hollywood – 1236 Flores. My 51st year. Built on a steep slope of the Hollywood Hills, this four-story building, constructed in 1932, commands a view from the Pacific on the west to the lights of Dodger Stadium on the east. Just north, the Sunset Tower glows with ghosts of old Hollywood -- Greta Garbo, Clark Gable, and Joan Crawford dallied there. Bette Davis kept an apartment nearby. When Marilyn Monroe filmed *Gentleman Prefer Blonds*, she lived up the street and around the corner. F. Scott Fitzgerald died several streets west. On a pavement slab in front of 1236 Flores, Jean Harlow signed her name when the slab was freshly wet; her studio built this place as a hotel for its starlets. Steve Erickson put 1236 Flores in his novels and called it “The Hamblin.” His apartment, on the third floor faced, west and south. On the fourth floor, my apartment faces east and north. He and I write for *LA Weekly*. We’re both writing books. I’m writing scripts. We’re what I call “working writers” – a dream come true, and, like all dreams, this dream is made of ambiguities, twisting and turning through what’s uncharted. For several weeks I go to the roof every night and face northwest, where a comet seems to hover. They call it Hyakutake. Even L.A.’s glare can’t dim it. Is everything connected? Maybe so. I feel connected to that comet by something more than fascination, but all I know of our connection is that we’re both just passing through. Gritty, glamorous L.A. and frantic, apocalyptic America are also the works of passers-by. As on that Brooklyn rooftop, I don’t understand much. Seems like that comet is the universe winking at me, for no reason in particular. Me going to the roof night after night – that’s how I wink back. It’s queerly satisfying. I draw no conclusions. I don’t need any. Not on this rooftop with that comet in the sky. I suppose that is why, in reverie, I return to that roof many times...

...I look at the reflection of my 24-year-old face. The Museum of Modern Art protects Vincent van Gogh’s *Starry Night* with glass. Stand where you will, transparent reflections coat the painting. But there is something correct about this: You must look at yourself and beyond yourself to see the masterpiece. (Some claim van Gogh painted as he did because something was wrong with his eyes. As Kierkegaard said, in a similar context, “Let those frogs croak in their swamp undisturbed.”) They’ve tried to make *Starry Night* vulgar by reproducing it on souvenir cups, mouse pads, and dishrags, but nothing can hurt it. Even on a mouse pad it does what it does and says what it says. I stand less than an arm’s length away; in relation to the painting, I stand where van Gogh stood to paint it. The stars perform their pinwheel swirls over an unquiet Earth where cypress trees rise in shapes of flames, for life flames in them. Life shimmers almost unbearably anywhere you look in the world of the painting, and, anywhere you look, your eye follows stroke after stroke as swirls of the stars flow into the earth while the things of Earth pulse into the starry sky, and nothing goes in a straight line, and nothing is excluded from the dance. And I, standing there, as so many others before and after me – I, and we, are not excluded. Our reflections have nothing to do with this. It’s as though the painting draws our reflections in and makes them part of itself. The proof is how quickly one’s reflection is forgotten. First it’s, “Damn these reflections.” Then, somehow, you no longer see

them. Van Gogh has won. For moments, his vision envelops you and you are part of it all. The poor devils wearing headsets to “explain” the painting – I barely refrain from jerking those things from their ears with, “Just look! It’s all there, where he put it.” Several times a week, for much of that year, I return to this painting, and to the *Water Lillies* of Monet, and to the dancers of Matisse, and I still return...

A sentence comes to me. I can’t take credit for it. It said itself:
Beauty is something you don’t have to deserve.

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