

A TRAILER BY THE RIVER
by Michael Ventura

Part I – March 29, 1996

Somewhere in the canyons of Texas is a river, and a trailer alongside it. This is wind country, sky country, where the land is dry and trees are few and far between. A country of sweet air and suddenly violent storms that sweep in as though intent upon *you* personally. A world of armadas of bright high clouds, brilliant sunsets, starry nights. And dawn, and just before dusk, the beige ground glows golden and rose as though lit from within. You hear coyotes in the dark. Days, you see roadrunners, wild turkeys, quail, hawks, owls, the occasional heron. Horses. Turtles. Tarantulas. White, almost translucent scorpions. Cattle. Deer. When there's a storm the river runs hard; mostly, it's shallow, swift and gentle by turns, and clear. Always, in the soft sands by its shore, the animals leave tracks. You could mistake it for a peaceful place. It's not. Tornados and lightning always threaten. And there are voices on the wind.

People don't often find the trailer unless taken there by one who knows the way. No stranger who *tries* to find it ever does, though occasionally someone stumbles upon it by chance, as I did long ago. The man who lives in the trailer doesn't believe in "chance," so those who come by that means are always welcome. (Merlin told Arthur, "Do not dishonor your feast by ignoring what comes to it.")

I'll call that man George. He's 20-odd years older than I, and 20-odd years is how long I've known him, so when we met he was roughly my age now – 50. He laughs when he sees you, hugs you with what is still a fantastic strength, and looks into you with the most intense eyes I have ever seen. George doesn't tolerate small-talk – not with anyone he respects. No matter how you came, no matter how you are, you start talking ideas. George radiates a sense that ideas are living things, wild animals to be trailed and chased; sometimes to be killed and eaten; often simply to be watched in their natural habitat, where, if we are still enough, they will come to investigate *us*, rather than the other way round.

Every few months I drive to that place. Even when I don't call ahead, he seems to know I'm coming. "I see you've got your notebook," he says. "Ever get the quotes wrong?" "Never – almost." "You sure?" "Try me." I read a few old pages at random back to him and he gives me that small smile that says he's ever so slightly impressed. I say, "You'll see. I'll write a book about you one of these days." "You can't write about a man like me." (I can't be sure if he means that, or if it's a challenge, or both.)

George's definitions of some basic words can't be found in the dictionary – for instance, the distinction he makes between "thinking" and "thought." "Thinking is compromise. Thought is pure. Thinking is reaction – listing, figuring, cataloguing. Thought is a moment of consciousness. When an artist has lost himself in his art, and nothing exists outside of that circle of energy, then he or she is in *thought*. A poor artist wants to *finish* a thing, make it perfect; a great artist leaves some things in refrain."

"In refrain?"

"That moment of expecting the next verse, the next word. Things left in refrain re things left in motion, rebels on the move. In viewing a work of art, or a deed of the day, it is the bold stroke that gives hope. Communications in this heightened energy are housed in symbols: parables of silence... ointments for the afflicted... art with honesty, that comforts the loneliness of those held captive... symbols that cannot lie. A writer, in an exceptional work, will have painted his trail of destiny between the lines, not in the lineage. It's the difference between art on display and art as a way of life. A creative effort must never be wasted to put a smile on the face of the lazy."

We are far from the coffeehouses of the cities. When I was young, haunting those joints, I didn't imagine that some of the most useful talk about art that I would ever hear, would occur in a Texas canyon, miles from even a small town, in a trailer by a river. I didn't imagine the variety of places in which truth could live and find a voice.

George says, "You're a messenger, I'm a messenger, but we too *need* messengers. We are all dependent upon messengers. If you miss the messenger, you're just putting in your time during this span. You call me a teacher. I work with, and I've always worked with, one type of person – a person who seeks the unexpected. People I admire are people who live by the code of the unexpected. I give credit to that nuclei of what you'd call 'normal people' as the backbone of the country, but I work with warriors who seek and

appreciate the unexpected and pay the price – ‘cause they’re the only ones who will ever be *reached* by the messengers. The messenger *appears*. It isn’t, ‘You go to the messenger.’ The messenger shows up. But you qualify for the appearance by being strong enough to face the unexpected -- and the appearance of the messenger is goddamned unexpected. How are we able to recognize a messenger depends on how well-informed we are about how to handle fear, and how to handle time.”

He pauses, then says, “Let’s walk by the river.”

My experience of such “sessions,” as we call them, is that I leave with new nuances clinging to words like “fear,” “messenger,” “time.” After talking with George, some words carry more freight the next time I use them.

The river is quiet. The sun is behind a thundercloud and the light of the land is subdued. I say, “Fear? Time?”

“Understanding time is understanding fear.”

We had often spoke of how crucial it is to take charge of one’s own time – and that this was especially true for what George calls “students” or “seekers.” (Seekers after what? Oh... you know.) But I had never heard this equation of fear with time.

“You can learn about time in dreams,” George says. “There is a time acceleration in the dream. You wake up and understand, ‘Gee, time is not necessarily the same in two places in the same environment. So when I go into the dream-state in daytime, I can go at a great pace without fear. In a deliberately quiet time, you’re able to comprehend at an amazing pace.’”

“I know that, George, but I don’t know why it is.”

“When you have a moment with yourself you have a moment with all of mankind. And with all of time. Michael, anything which is creative is a joint venture: it’s between you and the rhythm of time. When you try to force time, you’ll never know how good the work *could* have been. It’s not a question of the abundance of time, it’s the quality of time. The idea is not to look for days, or hours, or to wait for a vacation, but to go for moments. That’s all you need, because in a deliberately quiet time you’re able to comprehend at an amazing pace without fear. Time is consciousness. Consciousness does not recognize light or dark, nor fall nor spring. Just the way the dream does not recognize boundaries.”

“But time and fear?” I ask.

“We live in a world of distraction. People are sick of distractions, but they’re afraid to leave them. *Distractions are not time.* Distraction is just repetition.”

“When I was still a poet,” I tell him, “I wrote a line: Don’t mistake repetition for time.”

“You were having a good day,” George says. “When you leave repetition and step into the quiet, you step into time. When you step into quiet you step into *yourself* – it’s a harrowing experience. That’s where the fear is. *The most disruptive thing you can do in the world today is to create a quiet moment.* To move into consciousness there has to be the disruption of the external, and the greatest disruption is quiet.

“Any act of consciousness, any entry into consciousness, is the result of something stopped. A pause. *If you stop purposefully for a flicker of time, you are in consciousness.* Then you’re no longer in the world you were moving in. You’re in the moment, and time moves at a different rate when you’re in the moment – differently than it moves in the mechanical, in clock time. You learn to measure time not by the clock but by the amount of intake. So that your experience in seconds can equal an experience in days in mechanical time.

“And you need only need a reasonable amount of experiences of that extraordinary energy, no matter what the subject is or what the experience is, for you to realize: ‘During that moment I had no need to respond to any stimulation or provocation in the mechanical state.’ Now you build on that moment. As you begin to sense the exaltation that you feel when you have purposefully stopped a mechanical action, you begin to see that there are two worlds, and that you can occupy them simultaneously. To escape once, is to know you can escape again – as long as the privilege of absence is not abused. There is no need to forsake responsibilities as a prerequisite to a time search – only to rise to required levels of management of self. But you don’t get a quiet moment free. The price you pay, the price of admission, is overwhelming the obstacle – working through the fear, working through distraction, leaving the expected.”

An owl glided by looking for small creatures to eat. We watched it quietly.

Part II – April 12, 1996

A storm's come up. Wind-gusts shake the trailer. When there's a lull, we hear the swift waters of the river. In these barren West Texas plains I always wonder where the birds and critters wait out such weather. The thunder rumbles for hours sometimes. People who don't know this country can't believe that, but it's true. Lightning flashes and flashes. Somewhere in this great expanse, funnel clouds swoop from the thunderheads and travel the ground. Most are never seen and cause no harm, but now and then one will flatten a town.

George and I drink hot tea – his herbal, mine caffeine. (George gets his caffeine from the Diet Pepsis that fill the fridge.) He has two TVs tuned to two ballgames. The sound is off. It takes a life-or-death emergency for George to miss his games – that, or lightning hitting the generator. But lightning usually leaves George alone. *[Note, 2008: Lightning left George alone until about four years ago, when, at his house in the Panhandle, it struck through the wall, hit close to his arm, the house caught fire and burned to the ground while he and the others under his roof barely escaped.]*

Some kinds of lightning, anyway. In his mid-60s cancer visited George. The doctors said he had only months to live. Seven or eight years later, cancer's still a visitor with an honored if problematic place at the table. George talks of managing, rather than curing, his illness. He's employed every treatment – traditional and holistic, proved and unproved. But to this very unqualified observer, George has survived this long because of what he *thinks* about disease.

We often speak of it. The terminology, as always, is George's invention. He uses two terms that took me some time to grasp: "Old Memory" and "New Memory." "New Memory is a pause," he says. "Old Memory is a continuation." Old Memory is "body memory," genetic memory. It's what you're born with, and then it's conditioned, in turn, by the environment. New Memory is when you add an element that is beyond your programming – beyond what you were born with.

George believes that the body, like the planet itself, *is* memory: Both consist of cells and molecules *remembering themselves* from moment to moment as they recreate themselves. In short: Cells remembering themselves *in order* to recreate themselves. Memory, in his vision, is the glue that holds our physical existence in place. So if you *really* go beyond your programming, even only for moments, you can influence basic structures on the material plane, including your body. You can change the rules of the game.

George has been badly damaged by his disease. There've been no miracles; the cancer's still there. But so is George. And if he says that his theories of Old and New Memory are how he's stayed alive, I believe him. I don't know how long he can do it, but nobody lives forever. [*Note, twelve years later: He's still has cancer, is very frail, but still alive.*]

As the rain pounds the trailer, he explains: "What I've discovered has been discovered by others in ancient times *and* our time. But there's an edge there that's still waiting to be discovered; it will bring a simplification, and take these practices out of the esoteric into very simple basic understanding. I'll try to explain again:

"When the mind usurps the genetic communication, time is stopped. You've shifted masters. You may still not be in control of your body, but you have a say. You've unable to alter the *inventory* of parts, but you're able to influence the *interaction* of the parts. The body does not respond to a lie, but it does respond to the truth. The individual's only course of study is within himself. There are no two identical styles, no two identical ways. No one can speak for any other person when it comes to entry into consciousness – and entry into consciousness is entry into New Memory."

A lot of tall men are running around both TVs, often jumping up and down, paying excessive attention to a large ball. George's eyes never leave the games as he speaks:

"The body does not belong to you. The body came into this identity as a result of millions of years of previous activity, previous thinking. Upon awakening in this life, you are faced with a body contaminated with millions of years of disease and negative thought. You're gonna have to compete with all that. You gotta be careful, 'cause the body's a good liar. It tells you, 'I'm okay,' while it has a disease it doesn't even know

about because it picked it up millions of years ago. In order to challenge the memory in the body – which I call Body Memory or Old Memory, memory which gives you over to the lie – you set up New Memory, which works in coordination of the mind, over which you have some control.

“To compete with genetic intelligence [Old Memory] you were given, in the creation process, an opportunity to make your statement. You do this through developing a mind which could alleviate the lie in the body. This is not to disrespect the body. The body is trapped in its own memory, but the mind is not trapped. It also has the memory you feed into it [New Memory], which can be of a positive, exploratory, investigative nature. This can alleviate the handicaps the body came into this world with. New Memory is for the purpose of complementing one’s existence – of alleviating the discomfort *inherent* in the body that it didn’t ask for and has no way of getting rid of without outside help.”

The soundless jumping up and down on TV gets even more frenetic, and George gives this his whole attention. I’m grateful for the break. I’m a good note-taker, but I’ve been wondering if I’d be able to read my writing. I listen to the rain and the wind, and feel the constant thunder vibrate gently through every part of me that touches the sofa.

“The environment’s not stable,” George goes on. “That’s what gets you in trouble, but that’s also what can save you. I *believe* in traditional treatment – but why not give it all the help you can? There’s no way of knowing just *what’s* been helping in what proportions, but the doctors gave me up a long time ago, if you’ll recall.

“I’ve learned a thing or two about the body: You don’t have to directly effect it. You have to *entertain the idea* that there is a solution for this. You don’t have to know the solution. Somewhere in the quiet moment it will be supplied. You just have to address it.”

On the TV, several tall men are arguing with a short man in a striped shirt about the big ball.

“We mustn’t ignore the possibility,” George says, “that the DNA, on occasion, may bear false witness. The sanctioned theories claim that in evolution, DNA preceded the creation of the cell. That doesn’t make sense. DNA *is* memory – coded memory,

contained in molecular form. That's what it does, it passes on codes, which are memories."

"Wait up," I say. "You're saying that if DNA is just coded memory, then first it had to have something to remember? So the scientists have put DNA in the wrong place in evolution?"

"You *have* been listening," George laughs, "not just scribbling. The DNA blueprint, logically, could only have been based on existing information. DNA developed in the cell only after countless exposures to certain patterns of behavior, patterns that were sympathetic to survival in the face of adversity. At some point during all the repetitions of adversity, the cell finally noted the experience and logged it – logged what it remembered. Logging the memory of the experience represented the first genetic intelligence. That intelligence, once intact, elevated the cell to a higher stage.

"Think of the adversity! Think of what the cell, and then the DNA, had to go through to survive. That's why DNA, or body-memory, is so powerful – it had to come through difficult times, so it's justly defensive. It's in no mood to contemplate adjustment or change. That's why the human species resents change so much. A human being has to get up a full head of steam to even consider change, and a *major* head of steam to cause change.

"The progress of disease runs from body-memory through the brain. The origin of negative emotion starts in the brain. When the two energies are mixed – disease in memory and negative emotion in the Now – then the chemistry can activate disease. Genes can have the earmark of disease, but disease can remain no more than earmarks if negative emotion doesn't spark a war of cells. But it's tough to pull this off with the memory deck stacked against you. And we have an environment that's 99% fear, so you can't blame anybody for negative emotions. So we need help. And dependable help can only come from one place: *thought*, directed at the cells, at the DNA. Replacing Old Memory with New Memory. Because the DNA's job is to log memory, I believe the DNA responds. Not 100%, but just enough to change the equation."

He's looking at me now, even though the tall men are still jumping up and down with the big ball. The trailer's rocking a little in the wind.

“We underrate the force of our consciousness, we undervalue it. We only sense the need when we get into a pickle, find out we’re dying, and have to suddenly master all the forces we can.”

“Well, George – either they’ll have proved you right in 50 years... or not.”

“Then we’ll know that time is either our ally or our enemy.”

Part III – April 26, 1996

In this raw West Texas country, there are nights when the wind sweeps down like something out of the Bible. The sky’s clarity is almost painful, the starlight pierces you, and the land trembles beneath the gusts almost like a lover – as though only the most unrelenting wind could be a fit companion to these untamed expanses, these distances that seem to hide nothing until you get close and realize there are mysteries everywhere, on every dry riverbed, in every arroyo. Not far from George’s trailer, for instance, someone found a conquistador’s sword. We searched the books for records of an ancient expedition that had come this way. Couldn’t find one. You feel something hidden yet present, secret yet insistent, calling incessantly through the wind.

I was searching through another kind of book this windy night. George had turned in. I’d intended to bed down on the couch. The trailer was sheltered from the wind’s full force by a bluff, or it would have been crumpled like a beer can. But still the trailer shook, and the wind *did* howl. (I thought “howling wind” was a cliché ‘til I got to West Texas, but there’s no other word for that sound.) The wind howled, and screeched, and moaned, and I read.

The book is called *Light Years*, but you won’t find it in any store. Every once in a while, George writes a book. He prints 99 copies (that seems to be his favorite number), gives a few to selected friends, and lets the rest pile up here and there. Maybe strangers will find them one day, by chance or design, the way we all came across each other in the first place. He published a few paperbacks under other names long ago, but now he prefers to publish in this secretive, private way, as though to remind us what books are

really meant for: that they're like messages in bottles, written by people struggling to survive – messages making their way over uncertain waters to who knows where?

Light Years is a story about an angel, a bear, an eagle, and a few people, interspersed with transcripts of conversations that George has had with some of us – Spider, Cathy, Semira, me. I'd read it many times. Being troubled by love yet again (for I am a very slow learner), I was searching out some particularly troubling passages.

"Love is a living organism," George had written. I thought: If that is true, no wonder love has such power – being an organism and not (as we perhaps mistakenly perceive) a feeling, it exists on its own terms and not on ours. That would explain a lot.

George went on: "It is the only organism tenured for the length of the universe, and it is always present before the perfect cell is woken to populate a chosen habitat." I thought: He makes love sound like a great, invisible, wild animal that appears in different guises everywhere – or is that just how I'm reading this? I read on: "But love – even in its most powerful state – is mankind's most fragile energy. It is the single most distinct example of oscillating polarities."

What in the hell does that mean? The wind seemed to underscore my question.

He wrote of how "in a single second" love could oscillate between its widest and narrowest extremes, "which leaves one wrestling with a phenomenon endowed with chilling, contradictory dimensions." He said that this oscillation, beyond our control (for it's an organism, a creature that we encounter and become, not a feeling we have or own) can "drive the individual... to a state of madness that walks him/her along the edge of a cliff. It's a form of love/terror that penetrates deep into the psyche."

Penetrates *in*, rather than coming *out* from within. No wonder that to be in love can feel like such an invasion. The ancient Greeks spoke of this when they envisioned love not as a feeling but as an archer piercing you with arrows.

"The deeper the love," George goes on, "the deeper the converging danger. Conversely, the deeper the daring into the danger, the greater the potential enrichment."

Well, *that* much I understood.

"Is there ever enrichment without danger?" George continued. "Not in this dimension; danger is essential to complete the full cycle. But often, that's not as bad as the obscurities of a compromise that would keep one on the edge [of discovery]. When

you tumble [off the edge, into love], you're tumbling into no less than a fresh choice-of-identity."

A fresh choice of identity? I'm having a tough enough time with the identity I'm used to. But love opens up the possibility of an unexpected, unpredictable identity –not only the stranger without, but the stranger within...

Now I was reading a passage about lovers whom fate has separated – how sometimes they seek a resolution, a meeting, trying to defy their fate. "Contemplating a resolution to the separation could create a time/slip in the cosmic..."

A what?

"A distraction that could thrust the existing alignment of the silent tenure of the loves out of sync. Out of sync is out of peace, and [then] love is often better left alone. Because it exists only when you give identity to it yourself. And if you're not careful, and let it lead you, you can end up a *whole* different person. Bye-bye to whoever you were before."

I nodded off for a few minutes. Some dream, or something in the wind, woke me suddenly. I got my notebooks out of my duffle and hunted for what he'd told me once about love and artists.

"An artist is a person driven to the edge over and over and over. Every stroke of the brush may be one stroke too many. Every word may be one word too many. No artist can be saved from that. There's no refuge from that. But sometimes artists will look for refuge in love, and thus draw people to them who have been seduced into trying to give the impossible. The price of impossibility is the loss of one's identity. Bad luck all around.

"At the instances when we are involved in the wrong use of time, the time-pirates are at work. Part of the wrong use of time is to pursue a path in which you are seeking to fathom out and bring to understanding a complexity which defends itself against understanding. That's often an excuse for a relationship.

"The bad luck goes both ways. Within the bailiwick of the individuality of the artist, are drawn people who have complex problems. It's a horrible thing to say, but the animal of the artist has come kind of antenna that attracts people who are passing through intense psychic/spiritual difficulty. These people are convinced that their psyche's

experience is a springboard to the domicile of the artist. They're wrong, but their inner state demands a great deal of notice.\

“Their inner state tries to compete with the inner life of the artist. But a so-called normal person cannot create sufficient distraction to compete with the life, the thought, of the artist, so they have to create a complexity that puts them in competition with the artist – and this often puts them in a bizarre condition. They present a Scarlett O’Hara countenance that simply is omnipresent. But there’s no victim. The artist feeds on the complexity – and the ‘guest,’ as I call it, feeds on the artist. But it’s make-believe. You can’t give validity to make-believe, but you can play with it – recognizing it for what it is. But if you try to bring it to conclusion, like ‘saving the relationship,’ you go into madness. As I said, part of the wrong use of time is to try to bring a paradox, which defends itself against conclusion, to conclusion. That is self-indulgent.

“People in relationships with artists often pick up the gestures intended for the art along with those intended for the lover, and can’t distinguish between the two – and usually neither can the artist, until it’s too late. These are all traits that make relationships with artists difficult. Because these two people come from different countries of the heart – neither better or worse than the other, but different. So, when together, neither party is ever really themselves except by coincidence. And it’s in the moments of coincidence that some things feel decided. But the momentum takes you past that, and you move back into doubt.”

I’d ask, “What about *two* artists?” He’d said, “That’s like asking what about two storms, two earthquakes, two wars, two anarchists? Two artists? Can each artist give the other the freedom they demand and require for themselves?”

I hadn’t tried to answer that.

Then, with a sudden intensity, he’d said: “Truth is a state of pursuit rather than arrival. When you get to a point of arrival, you run the risk of contamination at that point. You really need to stay on the move.”

I put my notebooks aside. I guess I nodded off again.

George got up around dawn. The wind had died down. I hadn’t even noticed. He smiled at me. “Don’t you ever sleep?” “I nap occasionally. The dark is too inviting for

sleep.” “Well, you’re only 50 – still a kid.” “Someday,” I said, “maybe you’ll write a book with some rules to live by ‘stead of things that just make us ask more questions.”

I’ll never forget the laughter in his eyes when he said:

“You know the rules: No rules!”

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