

Bodies Made of Snow

By Michael Ventura

March 31, 2006

Twenty-six years ago (if memory serves) in Venice, Calif., a friend took me to a tiny club called the Come Back Inn to hear a singer who he said was "a young Sarah Vaughan." I thought he must be exaggerating. He wasn't. I was transported by what I heard. The singer was Dianne Reeves, who recently won a Grammy (not her first) for the soundtrack of *Good Night, and Good Luck*. She sang often at the Come Back that year (passing the hat for tips), and I took many friends to hear. Two were from Lubbock. When I visited them (I believe it was later the same year), they said, "You showed us a great young unknown; now we'll show you," and they took me to Stubb's original barbecue joint on the east side of Lubbock to hear Lucinda Williams.

On a recent Saturday afternoon in Austin, during SXSW, I had a similar experience.

My friend Jo Carol Pierce, a superb songwriter, told me (with a strange urgency in her voice) to catch a set by a young unknown at the Saxon Pub on South Lamar. There was no cover charge. In the spotlight on stage was 17-year-old (!) Sahara Smith. Her musical sophistication and the uncanny maturity of her lyrics astonished me – gave me chills – and made me realize (a little sadly) that it had been a long time since I'd been enthralled. What a wonder, to be enthralled again. After the show I told her and anyone else who would listen, "You're the most gifted young performer I've seen in 26 years."

I'm writing this because something strange happened during Sahara Smith's set. With impressive vocal precision – a voice as sweet as it was tough, as breathy as it was full – Smith sang a slow, eerie composition with this refrain: "The world's on fire/And we're all made of snow/There's nothing we can do/But let our bodies go." (Has she read Emily Dickinson? Miss Emily wrote like that.) Here was the strange thing: Her audience – transfixed, silent during that song and all her songs – broke into an ejaculatory applause, which can only be called an applause of recognition. We were so glad and thankful to hear those words.

But why?

Even as I was listening, even as I was applauding, I knew we weren't reacting just to the beauty of the performance – or, for that matter, to the beauty of the girl. It was that refrain. It pierced us through. The song begins with a boy on the highway "singing a song for the dead/Saying, 'Give me a Styrofoam angel/Let it kneel at the foot of my bed' .../The world's on fire." The verses that follow are just as mysterious, and then, "Let me watch what you do with your laughter .../Let it drift to the ground and be silent/Let it curve like a snake in the weeds/Let me descend/Nothing here bends anymore/The world's on fire/And we're all made of snow/There's nothing we can do/But let our bodies go." However lovely, however enthralling, it wasn't good news ... yet it felt like good news.

For days that moment has haunted me. When an artist leaves you with such a mystery you know you've encountered what art is for.

But still, there was the mystery – why were we, why was I, so glad and thankful to hear that refrain? Because it was sung with no anger? And with no despair? Rather, her voice was so calm, mournful, brave – and passionate. Most artists – most people – are emotional, but few are truly passionate. To be emotional is merely to react to something; to be passionate involves a kind of dedication, a dedicated way of radiating upon the object of our attentions. To be emotional can drain you; to be passionate is to be constantly renewed.

So perhaps that was it. This young girl's song is a moment of renewal amidst the flames.

The world's on fire. ... No one of any ideological persuasion can deny that. It's as though the inside of everything is coming out. What does that look like? It looks like this: Human beings live longer while so many marvelous animals become extinct – and the nation in which human beings are living longest, that nation rains death upon places of much shorter life spans. And it looks like this: The earth gets warmer because of our incessant human heat – the hot human psyche creating technologies that melt the ice caps, raise the oceans, threaten everything that this same psyche has constructed. And we all, of every ideology, feel threatened. We have bodies made of snow. ... Who really feels that they can withstand these flames?

And there's nothing we can do. ... It feels like that. Forgive me if I commit the indiscretion of quoting my own poetry, a letter in verse to my comrade Steve Erickson: "History has ended without ending. Now we have something else./It is burdened with history/but it is not/what we thought of/as history./It is wild/with meaning/but it is not/what we thought of/as meaning./The signature of the "real"/is that it will contradict itself/if you hang around long enough./... We are caught between the apex of meaning and its total destruction./We can neither save the former nor accept the latter./But we will die trying to do both./If only we were as happy as Henry Miller!"

Which is perhaps why I found joy in the last line of Sahara Smith's refrain: And there's nothing we can do/But let our bodies go. Not in Miller's hedonistic sense (though I like that too!), but in this way: We cannot hold on to what was, and we cannot hold on to what we were – not as a culture and not as individuals. If we try to hold on, we will only lose. We must let our bodies go – our physical bodies, spiritual bodies, cultural bodies, our very souls. Stop holding on, let go of what's been because that's the only way to find the new and to be new. If there is something new to come out of all this destruction, it will not be discovered by struggling to remain as we've been. And if it isn't discovered, it's doubtful that anything else will be, at least for us.

For some reason, thinking these things, I'm breathing easier. Feeling – days later, and far from Austin – the sense of release in that applause after Sahara Smith finished her song. That refrain released us, for a moment – and has released me tonight – from the raw fear of

this era that is the breath of our time.

Well ... if a 17-year-old can put me through this many changes with one angelically sung song ... then as far as I'm concerned, she's the real deal all right. (What she means by the verse, only she can know.)

I've been thinking a lot lately about two sentences by Randolph Bourne (I've quoted them before), written in 1917 when the world was embarking on this constant war, under many names, that's continued for nearly a century now, a war in which each generation is even more appalled than the last at the senseless power of all this destruction. Bourne wrote, "One keeps healthy in wartime not by a series of religious and political consolations that something good is coming out of it all, but by a vigorous assertion of values in which war has no part." By such a vigorous assertion – like that song – something good comes, instead of "is coming out of it all;" something new is present and alive. Bourne also wrote: "Now, while everything that is respectable in America seems to be putting its effort, with a sort of joyful perversity, into the technique of destruction, are there no desperate spiritual outlaws with a lust to create?" The answer is yes. In spite of hell, yes.

No matter if it's an unknown young singer in a little club on South Lamar (the "unknown" part won't last long in her case), no matter if it's in the room of an unknown poet destined to remain unknown, no matter – there are acts of creation, however desperate, that cannot be stopped. Which tells me that beauty has a power unsuspected by those who think of themselves as powerful. If, through these singers and poets, beauty can continue to renew itself in spite of hell – well, that's quite a power, what with all the arsenals arraigned against creation and beauty. Craggy, crabby Ezra Pound said it nearly a century ago: "Till change hath broken down/All things save Beauty alone."

Tonight as I write I'm listening to Sahara Smith's demo CD, listening to: "With every quiet breeze that stirs the grasses/I can hear the riddle of your name/There's only love when darkness falls/There's only love when time dissolves/When time dissolves." Perhaps she's right, or perhaps, as she also sings, "It's just a trick of the light." Beauty either way.

Copyright © Michael Ventura. All rights reserved.