

GATEWAYS -- PART 1

By Michael Ventura

September 29, 2000

It must have been from my mother that I received the conviction, unshakable even when I wanted to shake and escape it, that the Seen and the Unseen are adjacent to each other and necessary to each other. That messages are passed, constantly, between the two -- between this world and a felt Other World. That voices spoken in one of these worlds can be heard in the other. And that you sometimes walk through gateways so that, while still wholly in this world, you are also in the Other: A video would show nothing changed, yet you feel the laws of Time and Space behaving differently.

Animals are guides in this sphere ... my mother taught me that. When I was very little, in the late 1940s, she would take me to the Bronx Zoo one day and the Museum of Natural History the next. This was before television was common, before one's living room became a receptor for all sorts of improbable imagery, when zoos and museums (to the eyes of a child) were especially astounding. The zoo's giraffes and elephants and tigers and wolves were pure magic to me -- we got close to them, stared into their eyes, and it was like dreaming. There was something so deep and other-than-human and all-inclusive in how they watched us. They were captives of the city, but it had only captured their bodies; in their eyes was something utterly unconfined. They looked beyond us and yet included us in their gaze, and so we were included in what was beyond us. Of course I couldn't have articulated that, and my mother communicated it to me only through the intensity of her attention; nevertheless, I remember the feeling of being transported in their presence, as though what was unconfined in them was infectious, was entering me. Because they seemed not merely animals, I seemed not merely human -- a state that became the content of my dreams. (I still sometimes become those creatures in my dreams.)

Then at the Natural History ... animals exactly like the zoo's, but stuffed and arranged in "action" exhibits behind glass, utterly still, a stillness made all the more still by how our footsteps echoed in the museum's halls. I had no concept of "dead" -- though pneumonia had brought me to the brink of death over and over. (The doctors told my parents I wouldn't live to be five.) For me, these animals were merely still. I remember an eerie sense -- wordless, free of concepts -- that for them time hadn't stopped, time simply no longer applied. There was something extraordinary about their eyes too: they weren't *so* very different from the eyes of the creatures in the zoo. That same all-inclusive stare. Harder, glassier, but still fixed on something beyond, something that included me.

Ah ... funny how the psyche works. I just realized I'm writing this on what would have been my mother's 82nd birthday. She died at 70, so I can only look to my wall and ask her framed image, "What did you intend, spending all those hours with me in those strangely altered states at the zoo and the museum? Why did you take your sickly son over and over from the life of the zoo to the not-quite-death of the museum? What was going on when we went so often, and stayed so long, in those places that seemed not quite of This World and not quite of The Other World either? These days they call it 'trance-state,' Mama."

For Clelia, my mother, reality was a shifting and permeable thing, never fixed, never what it seemed. She paid dearly for her perceptions. Years and years in and out of

mental hospitals. She never accepted labels of "mental illness." As she put it, "Once in a while I trip trip trip ... and then I come back back back -- and the world is a much larger place than we thought." I know now that when I was little she was taking me by the hand on her 'trips.' She was in her late 20s then and still stable enough to trip without going flat-out insane. Our greatest teachers teach more by their presence than by what they say; they teach by the realities they embody. If they are strong, just being in their presence gradually acclimates you to what they know.

So it's not so strange that, when I was seven and ill in bed with one of my many fevers, I fixed my eyes on the rocking chair, the chair where my mother would sit and read to me and (I know now) try to conceal her fear that this would be the fever that took me. The chair was empty, I had the sense that no one else was in our apartment, and I saw a small red ball on the arm of the chair ... the chair was rocking by itself, and the ball rolled with the rocking ... and I heard an enormous soundless scream that filled the world ... at first I thought it was coming from the ball, but then I realized the ball was balancing on the edge of the scream and that the scream was actually coming from the closet, and that the closet was really a shaft that went down into the depths of the earth. Most would say this was only the fever, but my mother taught me better. That illness was a gateway through which I passed to a vision. There are times when even a child can hear the suffering of the entire earth, for our combined suffering makes a soundless enormous scream and if you hear it once you never forget it.

The elements of which we are made were created in the boilings of stars, so it's not very extraordinary that we can hear the Universe if we learn how to listen. Sometimes fevers help us learn. Sometimes madwomen, madmen. Sometimes, the eyes of the wild beings who cannot forget what they are and what they're here for, as we do, we who seek forgetfulness relentlessly and have made a world of its vacancy ... the creatures remind us. Which may be why we kill them for sport: to enforce forgetting. And sometimes, if we are fortunate, someone takes us by the hand ... and years later ...

Years later, after many roads and dreams, sometime in the late 1970s, I was driving with Sara into Joshua Tree National Monument, on the western edge of the Mojave. Doing about 40 on a winding two-lane. A snake, impossibly swift, darted straight out across the road, and I thought surely I'd run over it. I don't know how I didn't. The space between my wheels must have been just right. Sara looked where we'd been. "Did I hit it?" "No, and now it's gone." And just then a cloud of small black insects enveloped the car. I don't know what they were. It was frightening. Couldn't see the road. And then, inexplicably, they were gone too. This was no fever, and we weren't high. I don't remember if it was I or Sara who said, "We've passed through a gateway. That was a gateway."

It was the first time I'd used, or heard, that word in that way. The word made many experiences clear to me. We both had the sense that we were no longer in what I refer to now as "the world that calls itself The World." It wasn't that everything was in slow motion ... rather that Time was elongated and there was plenty of room to see and be aware of ... let's not put a name to what. The desert was alive, and conscious, and watching. I know now that there are times when you can see the joy, the becoming, of all the earth. The Western concept of the body is, basically, a biochemical machine; but what if your entire being, body included, is more like a song than a machine? And what if your being is constantly in a harmonic relationship with all the songs around it? What if you don't call it "my life" but "my song"? Then one of those desert spring storms came out of

nowhere suddenly, and it was as though even the lightning was taking its sweet, sweet time. Tender lightning. As Butch Hancock sings it, "Pure energy can't tell lies."

Two years ago, in that very place of the snake and the insects, driving alone slowly ... not one coyote but a pack, six or seven of them. I'd never seen more than one before ... they loped across the road slowly, at twilight, that gateway again ... I took my foot off the gas and the car slowed as it drifted forward and they avoided it easily and one looked back at me ... There are those who don't spend their days forgetting. As George might put it, there is a kind of memory that increases and elongates the space of the present. A Jewish seer found this image useful: "In my Father's house there are many mansions."

"Live it. Suffer it. Delight in it." So my mother once instructed. The bear in the zoo had immense eyes. I know now that the bear in the museum was ... dead, they call it. Yet the song of its "bearness" was still alive ... the songs we call our "bodies" heard it. I am three or four, and my hand is being held as we step through a gateway. I am soon to be 55, and I reach out my hand as, here on the page, I enter a gateway with a stranger who may be you. Something, someone, takes my hand. I don't know what or who, but I know I am held. And there is singing.

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GATEWAYS -- PART 2

By Michael Ventura

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There's a metaphor that's been obsessing me lately. "Just a raindrop in a storm," I keep telling myself. "I'm just a raindrop in a storm." If I say it out loud on street corners I'll get put away, but I can write it here and you can pick it up on a street corner, or wherever, and I get paid -- what a life. Now that I think of it, maybe I got the metaphor from Butch Hancock's song, a song I heard him sing in a living room in Lubbock my first days in Texas, half my life ago, years before he recorded it: "If you were a raindrop, you'd be fallin' ..." "Just a raindrop in a storm." We come from somewhere we do not know, and we are bound for somewhere we do not know, and in between we're lit by lightning, and like the rain, every drop of rain, we are more alike than different, we are important yet forgotten, we are temporary yet needed, we are thirsted for. And life is a long leap through the wind.

And one morning this last August, in southern Utah ...

It had rained the night before: great flashes of lightning ricocheted over Monument Valley ... watching from the little town of Mexican Hat a few miles north, the smell of the rain so sweet in that vast and spectacular country which still has the feel of the ocean bottom that it was millions of years ago ... it wasn't a restful rain. I don't sleep much or well, never have, and so I woke in the dark, maybe an hour before dawn, dressed quietly without waking Hannah, and went and sat by the river.

The San Juan River makes a narrow gash through that part of the world, runs fast and muddy toward wherever it joins the Colorado ... you sit on the ledge of the rock and look at it about 30 feet below ... the storm had passed, there was a big moon, full or just a little less than full, and it made a clear bright rippling reflection on the swift black water below. Strange, and an unexpected privilege, to look down on the moon, a dreamlike moon for it was in motion, rippling yet still, and I could look down and see all its details, then look up and see that same moon frozen high in the night sky. A night of two moons.

And reality parted, a gateway opened up in the darkness, a gateway that would stay open longer than I thought a gateway could ...

I decided to sit and watch the river for however long it took for the dawn to come and the sky to brighten: I wanted to see the moment when the moon left the river, when the sky would be so bright that the black waters would take on color and blanch out the moon.

Most knowledge is temporary, and history seems to change everything faster and faster, but you can connect to all the Time that's past and all the Time that will come by entering a state of silence. Nothing mystic about it. If you can find a silence, or make your own silence in the midst of noise, it's the same silence that was there at the dawn of humankind and will be here when we're all gone. It is the only, or at least the most accessible, connective thread to everywhen and everywhere. And when you find it, it changes Time, or your sense of Time -- not so much slows it down as makes it malleable. Time becomes not something that's happening to you, but something you're made of and part of. That's why the sages say that meditation is not passive or still; it's a stillness full of movement, a stillness that moves with true Time and not clock-time, still as the reflection of the moon on the river, and moving like the moon on the river.

So I sat in that connective state, and waited.

The day before, in a little Utah town called Boulder, which is so remote that it was the very last town in America where the mail was still delivered by mule train ... in Boulder I'd seen hundreds of hummingbirds. Yes, hundreds. Hovering and darting over a swampy pond. When there are hundreds, they're a little frightening. There was a restaurant, tables on a porch, and hummingbird feeders hung on the porch, and the quick small birds darted around near our heads, and it took some getting used to. All that incredible movement ... that was like the silence by the river.

All the more like it was when there was not more light but just slightly less darkness, and the bats left their nests and darted, flashes of shadow, between me and the reflection of the moon below. And my little thoughts didn't seem like mine, they seemed they were darting here and there, hummingbirds and bats, leaving their nests and feeding ... my thoughts seemed to have little to do with me, until I thought of something my brother Aldo said:

"You and your life, intimate lovers but never friends."

He meant it as a general "you," but he said it to me, and it was more true than I wanted it to be, but maybe that was changing.

You come when a friend calls. I felt called and I was there, on this little perch of life. A little progress was being made. As though the reflection of the moon had dared me to catch the moment when it disappears. To teach me that you can't. Or I can't.

I never took my eyes off it. Once dawn truly started I really never took my eyes off it. Delicate shade by delicate shade, the sky took light. The cliffs of the river became their raw sienna. The river became its slightly bloody brown -- too brown to reflect sky or clouds, though now and then, in a temporary swirl or eddy, a cloud would appear and disappear like a white shadow. The moon's reflection had moved, of course, as the moon moved above, so the swath of river I concentrated on shifted slightly downstream, but I concentrated. And I thought I was still seeing it when I realized it was no longer there, and I hadn't seen it disappear, hadn't been aware of the moment.

It was still in my eyes when it was no longer on the river.

I laughed. I never felt better. The gateway hadn't closed!

But I gave no thought to what might happen because of that.

"You make the path by walking." So wrote the poet Antonio Machado.

Not two hours later, an hour's drive north, through the Valley of the Gods, a long indent in the land out of which jut rock formations like nothing anywhere else ... we were the first people that morning to drive into Natural Bridges National Monument. As we drove the narrow road to the viewing points we saw only one park ranger in a pickup. You go to a cliff edge and look into the gorge, and there a stream had somehow, millions of years ago, cut through the rocks to form them into arches, astounding structures. One is called by the Hopi word "Sipapu," which means "the place of emergence" -- the handout they give you at the gate tells you this means "an entryway [gateway!] by which the Hopi believe their ancestors came into this world."

North Americans have walked here for 9,000 years. Not in droves. Singly and in small bands. Now and again. Some painted their images of the divine on the rock. Europeans, living in what was then an immense forest, had to build their cathedrals; the tribes of the West had no need for that. Cathedral-like formations were everywhere they walked, everywhere they looked. How could anything built by human hands compete? The rest of America was sweltering under a heatwave, but here in the morning it was cool, we wore jackets, we looked at the Natural Bridges in as perfect a silence as there is.

My wife, Hannah ... she's so many people ... I'm so many people ... often when we speak, only two or five of those people show up ... but all the others are beside them, present and demanding representation ... it's only when we're silent ... it's only when we become part of that connective tissue, silence, which connects everyone to all things ... it's only then that all those people make one circle and those two creatures we each call "I" stand together in the center of that circle ... and so, silent, with all our faces facing each other ... I heard music.

Not a symphony, not jazz, certainly not rock, or blues, or anything like that. The sweet tinkly music of a 19th-century music box. It's made of wood. It has a simple mechanism inside it. Mechanical, not digital. You open the box and it plays a simple, elegant song. A little corny. An "I'm just a raindrop in a storm" kind of song.

I heard a song as played on an old music box. I heard it as clear as anything.

"Hear that?" I asked Hannah.

She didn't. She asked what I was hearing and I told her.

I know I would not have heard it if I had not sat watching the reflection of the moon in the early hours. Gateways are like that.

We drove to another place to stare, in that silence, at another stone bridge.

I heard the music again. Clear as speech spoken close to your ear.

Again Hannah didn't hear it. She looked at me with some slight concern, but then she got what was going on, smiled and said: "God's such a tease."

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