

THE WITNESS TREE – Memoir of a Ritual

By Michael Ventura

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*I give this record of my journey
not as a contribution to human knowledge,
because my knowledge is small and of little account,
but as a contribution to human experience.*

- Henry Miller

Let me tell the story from the grave. Life, seen from the grave, looks like the negative of a photograph: light turns dark, dark turns light, the photo reveals secrets it didn't know it was keeping. This is a story, in any case, that leads to a grave, then proceeds from that grave, so it's best I lie in it and speak from it.

Fifteen years before the grave . . .

There is a damp, moldy bungalow, no better than a shanty, where Diane and I eke our way through a wet Austin winter – but compared to the grave it's a palace, and Diane and I are blessed. We know enough never to be lovers, for one thing, as we nurse each other through a season of breakdowns that would otherwise have left Diane (perhaps) and me (certainly) in mental wards. At the climax of my crackup I sit in a smelly green armchair without moving or talking for three days, three nights, “catatonic” they would call it, while Diane goes to work, comes home, tends me, tries to feed me sometimes, sits by me, lets me know I'm not alone. It takes courage to watch a friend go through that without running to some authority to palm off the responsibility. As I begin to revive, *she* starts to slip and I tend her. We do not analyze, we do not delve, it is both too late and too early for that; we simply do not leave each other in this dark wood. (I suspect this is an ancient therapeutic technique, however forgotten or unresearched today.) Toward the end of her crisis she looks at me wearily, she smiles, she says, “Thanks for going first.” It is December, Merle Haggard has a hit called, “If We Make It Through December,” sometimes we can afford cheap wine and we get drunk sitting by the radio, listening to the C&W station, waiting for Merle's song, and when it plays we sing our hearts out to it, laughing like crazy.

From the perspective of the grave this behavior is proper and conservative: death is taken for granted, rather than taken as something that can be put off by earning money or making art; sanity is measured by friendship and compassion, rather than by order and strength of will; ambition, intelligence, even sex are less to be valued than singing and laughter. And wasn't our suffering the suffering of acute vulnerability to our own hearts and the world's? And wasn't it a better suffering, seen from the grave, than that other

suffering called “normalcy,” which is the suffering of being closed to everything but one’s own needs – or, as they say now, “priorities”? Looking back from the grave, that far-off time with Diane seems to me one of my saner Decembers.

Two weeks before the grave . . .

Fifteen years have passed, and I have earned a certain notoriety as a writer. *Which means nothing to the grave.* Diane has a respectable job, a house she bought herself, and a child. *The grave awaits them all.* My mother has recently died. *The grave accepts her happily.* So has my marriage. *The grave doesn’t believe in coincidences.* I have fallen in love with another woman. *The grave knows the song.* But even so, I want more than anything to join my mother. *Death being certain in any case, the grave is not impressed by my impatience.*

I can’t get it out of my head that there is such a thing as forgiveness – not from God, but from people, both the living and the dead. Nor can I get it out of my head that the way to earn this forgiveness is to die.

I’m not aware I’m thinking this, but I do think it, all day, every day. It doesn’t matter that people I love insist I don’t need forgiveness, and that, okay, if I think I do, then presto! They forgive me. But I don’t believe them. I know – I have absolute knowledge (the most dangerous kind) – that when I am in my grave both they and everyone I have hurt will certainly and definitely and believably forgive me. *The grave knows better, but I am not there yet.*

It never occurs to me to forgive myself. Once a Catholic, always a Catholic. The Church robs one of the power to be one’s own priest or priestess. (That’s what the Reformation was about, taking back the power to be one’s own priest, but that great intent got corrupted by Puritans.) I haven’t been to Mass in 25 years, but I am a better Catholic than I know. For all my highfalutin talk about ritual and the gods, I cannot forgive myself because I don’t feel the power to be my own priest.

The power to die is much more accessible. One needs nothing but sufficient desperation.

Let us slip into the past tense for a paragraph, and ask why my mother’s death so shattered my life. Suffice it to say that without a real Clelia in the world somewhere, a real person on whom (without knowing it) I still anchored my deepest feelings, the Clelia within me went wild, wilder than the real Clelia ever had, and my feelings of madness and abuse and sex and love – they burst the bounds of my life. For I had had a life, a craft, a family, a wife, and there was love there, however strained, subverted and flawed it had become. Terrible things had been happening within that life, but invisibly, in slow motion; Clelia’s illness and death had spun the process out of control. The life I’d been living needed patience, care, moderation, dedication – but they were all beyond this spirit that now possessed me, this unstoppable hermaphrodite dancer.

Look at it dance, with my legs, my genitals, my middle-aging stomach, and Clelia’s face, Clelia’s breasts, my face, hers, mine, hers . . . Look at it dance, ranting poems, seeing gods – it whirls and it has feet and hands, it whirls and it has claws and hooves, a hand and a claw, a hoof and a foot, a nose then snout then a nose, hair then fur then snake scales then hair, and in this creature’s lair is my writing, in this creature’s nest is my sex, in this being is much of what is best in me, and I cannot let it dance away

without me. I go where it goes, whatever the cost. It dances away from my family, so I leave them. It dances away from my job, so I leave it. It dances into the arms of another woman, so I revel there. And if it wants to dance me into death, where we can finally be forgiven – then let's die.

The grave is very patient with all this razzmatazz, as it is patient with everything. The living imagine there are distinctions between this death and that, but the grave turns all deaths into the same death and sees all existence only as a flurry before dying. My flurry was no better or worse than another's.

So. In April, on the same night that Abbie Hoffman (whom I knew only slightly) took his life, I almost go. And it's a first, a big surprise. Never *really* occurred to me before, I thought that it would be an impossibility – to do it myself, I mean. I'd said I wanted to die, but even I thought it was just a chapter in my usual melodrama. This night however, I had come so close, so close. My brother Aldo stops me. He himself is incarcerated in a mental ward on Staten Island (as a family, we keep a lot of people busy), but Aldo senses something, calls me collect, talks me down. My shrink and my girlfriend Zee's shrink are both wondering about committing me. Hey, I'm not a crazy person, I'm a nice guy, a talented guy, a semifamous guy. This ain't like back in Austin, I've got money in my pocket now, what the fuck are you talking about? I had a little episode, it's over, I wrote a column about it, end of discussion.

Weeks later it's Zee's turn to save me. Then it's her turn *again*. Zee's as tough as Barbara Stanwyck (whom she slightly resembles), but a whole season of saving me is wearing her down. It's not her job to read my mind, a point she insists on with stubborn clarity, but she senses rather than knows the spirit she's *really* living with, sleeping with, the hermaphrodite dervish dancing out of control. Zee was glad to dance with it in bed (my dervish's happy hunting ground and natural habitat) but how can she chase the thing, calm it, soothe it back to a place where it will at least not kill me?

And what if it decides to kill her?

It is a terrible thing when a brave person becomes afraid of you, even if just for a day. It wakes you up. Then you see, truly, that, in Hemingway's great phrase, you have "gone beyond where you can go." It is unlikely you can save yourself, and unlikely that any one person – lover, therapist, friend – can save you. Your dervish has taken over. This thing, this fertile creature, this fecund freak, that had been your secret strength, your originality, the spirit who whispered your best thoughts to you – it's taking you over, finally, as you always feared it might, and you are dancing down into the grave.

I've used the word "possession," as in being possessed by a spirit. And that's true, but the spirit is not alien, like the Christians would tell you; no, it is of oneself. You are not one person, you are many people, you are a community of moods and selves under one name. Parts of you aren't even human, they're part mammal, part reptile, part rose, part moon, part wind. And life is a question of which parts of you are dominant – which, in effect, possess you. (I think most people walk around possessed by the dullest parts of themselves, and that this, the worst state of possession, is what's called "normal.")

The grave has absorbed monsters of every size, some 50 feet high, some no larger than a human heart, and it has sucked down every dancer since Salome, and before her, throughout time. The grave is unimpressed by any spectacle my poor psyche can offer. It is said that some have escaped the grave. The grave is amused that the two for whom this claim is made in Western tradition are Jesus and Oedipus. What ever could they have in common?

So. As I was saying. Fifteen years have passed since that damp shack in Austin. Diane and I keep close tabs on each other. After the time of “If We Make It Through December,” each of us is committed to never let the other go down without a fight. This is a commitment, that, as you’ve seen, I sometimes don’t keep for myself, but I keep it for Diane, and she keeps it for me. There are a few friends I love as dearly, but there’s no friend whom I allow to step into my life with the sort of authority I grant Diane.

Diane calls. I hadn’t called her when my mother died – I still don’t know where she heard it – and, in a way, that was like sending up a flare to tell her I’ve got trouble.

There is a difference between having problems and having trouble. You can talk or think your way out of a problem, but you have to *do* something to get out of trouble.

Diane, laying on her West Texas lilt a little thick, as she likes to when making a point, says, “Well, Mahkle. You ready to do some *work*?”

“Work?”

“Get your ass up here to Lubbock and we’ll do some work.”

The day before the grave . . .

Things get lighter now. Other people move more freely into my story. The grave breathes easier. For graves, as you’ve noticed, are rarely off by themselves. They like the company of other graves. This may say something that the existentialists did not suspect about death.

On the flight to Lubbock with Zee I am thinking of Diane’s altars – wondering whether Diane realizes how much of a teacher she’s been to all of her friends in the matter of making altars and shrines and sacred places. It’s more than 10 years ago that she made her first altarpiece, or the first one I saw. It was almost as though she had made it for me, being that I’m her only Sicilian friend, for it was kind of an Aztec rendering of St. Lucy – the Sicilian saint who goes about holding a saucer on which are two eyeballs. It’s part of my altar now, has been for years.

By “altar” I mean only: a small nook in my apartment that I’ve consecrated, where a candle always burns, and on which rest small objects from moments in my life that need the haven of this blessing-place where every day I say my prayers. In the last few years many have taken to doing this. I made one cross-country drive, and no one I visited had an altar; I made another a year or so later, and many did – and most didn’t know about the others. (When I wrote a column about that, a reader sent me a wonderful note that ended, “Even the assholes I know have altars now.”) It is all part of the long and uncertain attempt to become one’s own priest or priestess – to officiate, as the Church would say, for oneself and for each other. A parish of friends.

The grave sighs. Every denomination has started out with a parish of friends and ended as just another Church feeding off its worshippers and its enemies. If this is some sort of movement we are unknowingly, or unconsciously, part of, then we are lucky to be like the early Christians, reckless with the devotion they discovered and unbound by any rules; for the grave knows that, like them, in a hundred years it’s unlikely we’ll be able to recognize or stomach what we’ve had a share in starting. The grave has heard too many prayers to care about the details. Only the ground note of holiness matters.

Thousands of feet in the air, at hundreds of miles an hour, Zee and I hold hands and pray. Not out of fear. I have never been able to bring myself to beg the gods for safety. No, we pray both because we love to pray together and do it often, and because

praying opens a window between this world and the Other World, and those worlds freshen each other. Life, in prayer, does not run from death; nor, in prayer, does death exclude life – for, as a great *zaddick*, the Rabbi Pinhas of Koretz, once said, “Prayer unites the principles.” *The grave is this fact.*

But why, with all this prayer, am I still so crazy? I ask myself that sometimes, then get so embarrassed at the silliness of my question, for people have been praying for eons, at every level of faith and devotion, and the history of those eons makes it clear that, whatever prayer does and is, prayer is not about sanity. “*What does Eternity care about sanity?*” *So mocks the grave.* Prayer is about having both the need and the courage to spend some moments open to Eternity. Which is just as likely to make you crazy as to make you anything else.

Which may be why Diane’s father once told me, “If prayer is cut out to be what I think it is, it oughta have a touch of humor in it.”

It’s a bright autumn day in the Texas Panhandle, where the wind never stops and its sound is part of every noise and every silence. Diane has a large backyard, the garage is her studio, there’s a patio with chairs and a superb tree under which there is a fire pit. A high plank fence makes it private. We sit on Diane’s patio, drink beer, smoke cigars and cigarettes, listen to Butch Hancock and Joe Ely, Patsy Cline and Hank Williams, whiling the day away. We talk about God and about who’s fucking whom, and it’s so strange, to feel so good and at home, and at the same time to be this other Ventura who can’t be trusted to stay alive. Can’t be trusted for anything.

Zee and Diane look into each other’s Celtic eyes and know they will be friends. Some warrior-witch signal of trust that no man is fast enough to catch passes between them. Then Spider and Lora come by – no need to call first, they just come by, that’s how it is in this part of the world. Spider is tall and wiry, funny, gentle, but with a toughness you wouldn’t want to challenge – and Spider’s always thinking, *really* thinking. Lora looks like Patsy Cline sings – meaning, if I’d never seen Patsy Cline’s picture, I’d expect her to look like Lora, with Lora’s sad laughing eyes. She and Diane are best friends, and I’ve known Lora for as long as I’ve known Diane – we’re what I call “close from a slight distance.” Lora and Spider have been together for years, they live in a little West Texas town where they earn their living (or not, depending on luck) carving exquisite art out of wood.

A grave is growing in that backyard, and I don’t know it.

Then James comes by. I don’t know him, He’s a new friend of Diane’s, a hard man to read and I think he likes it that way. I learn he’s about my age, a ‘Nam vet, loves guns, often carries one – not that I think he needs it, with the way his eyes pierce and how well he carries his solid weight. I trust him not only because Diane does, but because trust is the body’s judgment, not the mind’s. My bones trust him.

We know more about what pries people apart than what brings them together. Actually, we know practically nothing about what brings strangers together – a rather fantastic fact when you think about it. Zee knows no one but me, Spider and Lora don’t know Zee or James, James doesn’t know me or Zee or Lora or Spider, Diane doesn’t know Zee, I don’t know James – and no one knows the alchemy by which we talk as if we’ve all known each other a very long time. *It’s possible even the grave doesn’t know, This may be beyond its field of expertise.*

Diane and James, and another man and two other women had gone into the badlands of New Mexico, for some days, to do what they called “work.” “The prayer is in

the *doing*,” James says several times that afternoon. “It is not in the thinking about it.” (He can’t know he is giving Zee and me one of the sentences of our time together, a sentence that will pass between us whenever we need it: “The prayer is in the doing.”)

Before they went to New Mexico, Diane, James and the other man and two women (none of whom were sleeping together) had come to some audacious conclusions: that helpful as therapy is – and philosophy, and religion, and booze, and art, and rock & roll, and whatever gets you through the night – as helpful as all that is, they had need of some hands-on ritual. What is ritual? Ritual is: to *enact* the metaphor. You get an image and instead of thinking about it or writing it down or forgetting it, you *do* it. Enact it. Put yourself through the metaphor that the imagination offers. With a little help from your friends.

And yes, that’s why sex play can be so intense: it follows the basic forms of ritual, it enacts the metaphor. Religious fundamentalists hate pornography not because pornography is evil, but because it’s a rival; pornography is a form of religious fundamentalism. The basis of any fetish is that it’s a metaphor you can enact on your own, that you can *do*, and, if you do, the result (you hope) will be transcendent. The object of religion and the object of sexual obsession are the same: the transcendent moment. The fundamentalists include sexuality in their religion by obsessively opposing it, the way the sexually driven include religion by offending it. Everybody’s happy. *Religion and sex being, as we all know, so concerned with death, even the grave is happy.*

It is precisely this relationship between sexuality and ritual that is one of the highest barriers to becoming one’s own priest or priestess. Ritual unleashes enormous energy. That’s why most religions put so many strictures on their priests – to make the priests contain that energy, to keep it in control, focused. So when a few ordinary people take it on themselves to create ritual in their lives, they are playing with more than fire – they are playing with the religious history of their race. They are standing at the crux of what history has been running from for centuries.

So the air becomes charged as Diane and James tell us about the work, the ritual, about how five people put themselves through three-dimensional metaphors in an environment beyond the law. They didn’t say pretentious stuff like “We are going back to the roots of religion,” or “We are rediscovering the origins of theater,” or “We’re back at the threshold of sex” (though there was no sex involved)—that’s not their style, and, anyway, they were just trying to heal themselves and help each other. And more than that, like us, they were flying blind, they didn’t really *know* what they were doing. How could they? How could we? They knew only what moved them and they made a pact to trust that.

It involved a lot of confusion. They made their campfire, and, as they had learned from the Indians, blessed the four directions – and then they noticed that the fire cast their shadows on the canyon wall, and that their shadows looked like ancient petroglyphs.

“And it was *not* unfamiliar,” James tells us.

“We didn’t have a clue about what we were doin’,” Diane says. “It was ‘Let’s pretend’.”

At one point, they could only scream. James says, “We taught the coyotes all *about* screamin’.”

And then something unexpected happened to them. It’s not my place to say what – and it really doesn’t matter what, it would be different with different people. But it happened, and Diane felt a shift. They all did. She tells us in her back yard: “And then I

said, ‘This is the opening – this is the opening we’ve been looking for.’” And their healing work proceeded from that opening.

Is this the kind of audacity I’m supposed to be capable of? As Diane used to say, “Do you know how to spell ‘fat chance’?”

The talk in the back yard goes on – beer, cigars, God, who’s fucking whom – and the work, and the thoughts that come from *their* work. James says something that burns out a few synapses in my brain: “Jesus was trying to bring tribal society into the present.” Oh yes. It’s becoming clear, though it’s never said, that James, this man I’ve never seen before, has been, in effect, selected by Diane to lead my work. Speaking of the world in general, he says, “Core values that have been hurt have to be healed.” But he is also speaking of me. “And to do that,” he goes on, “we are calling on the healers of all time.”

I venture a question about preparation and James says, “Number one, share the intent. Number two, be prepared to share it.” I am amazed at the depth of authority they have acquired from their experience in the badlands. “You have to be invited with full consent, full informed consent, to work on the mythos level.” Oh. *That’s* what this afternoon is all about.

The day of the grave . . .

There are graves suspended in air. The people who once hunted these high plains, the Comanche and the Kiowa, like the Apache and the Navajo to the west, and the Sioux and the Paiutes to the north, raised their graves above the ground on poles. In a wind-sheltered dip in the land, or in a small box canyon, their “burying ground” would be a cluster of platforms – graves, as I said, don’t like to be alone – on which the dead lay, decked out in their finery, with some tobacco, and with whatever tools and jewels they would need in the Other World. The weather and the birds did for them what the worms do for us. All graves partake of each other. If a grave can just as easily hover as burrow, then perhaps the graves beneath the earth are straining upward, and the graves that hover don’t mind sinking.

The morning is pretty and fresh. We eat a big country breakfast at a table in Diane’s back yard – the same people who were there yesterday. I am more calm than I’ve been in a very long time. I’m not thinking of “the work” at all, it’s not real to me that it’s even going to take place, and maybe I’ll decide not to do it and we’ll just have another afternoon of good, far-ranging talk.

Talk and music. All Diane had told me to bring from L.A. for the work was music. I didn’t give it any thought, just took the three tapes that struck me as I was about to leave. The one we play through breakfast I’ve labeled *Dreaming With Django*. I’d taken Django Reinhardt guitar solos and duets off several records. The depth of tone of his Gypsy jazz, recorded half a century ago, goes just fine with the sound the wind makes in the leaves. The other two tapes are Miles Davis’ *Sketches of Spain* and a tape that combines k.d.lang’s *Shadowland* with her *Absolute Torch & Twang*.

Where has my dervish gone? He/she’s talking, but I don’t know it. I’m told later that all through breakfast I didn’t speak but to tell stories about my mother, her life, her death – the dervish dancing on the tip of my tongue and I can’t remember a word. The others talk, too. Zee disappears into the house, comes back with something wrapped in a napkin (there’s a golden flower on the napkin) and hands it to Diane. Diane opens it. It’s Zee’s necklace from Fiji, a marvelous thing. This, I think, is what Diane would call our “opening.” Diane is so moved she starts to cry. I put my arms around her. For some

reason we're all suddenly crying, even Spider. We kind of laugh about it, but our eyes are still wet.

What just visited us, through Zee's giving? We cannot say, but it feels as though spirits have arrived, gentle ones, here for the work. I'm not even frightened. Diane puts on the necklace and says, "Well, Mahkle – it's that time."

Spider and Lora hadn't even intended to stay! They were just having a meal and saying goodbye before driving the two or three hundred miles to their town, they weren't intending to be part of the work. But something in that visitation has decided for us all. They have no intention of leaving now. Somebody says something about calling in sick, and Lora says, "Let's call in *well!*"

The darkness within me is baffled at this light. I make a note to tell Zee later: "Love needs shadows, work needs light." It's like a little chant in me. The words stay awhile, then go away. *A grave is opening up, not like I thought it would, but gently, flowerlike. I should have known that graves like light.*

Diane tells me to choose my music. I'm walking as though in a daze, a strange viscous atmosphere has descended on us, as though time is being pulled like taffy. Little things, like putting the Miles Davis tape into the machine, take a long time. The machine eats the tape, but somehow doesn't damage the tape. I put the k.d.lang tape in, but I don't turn it on. I'm in a strange state of waiting, aware that the others are doing things, but I don't know what.

Later I will learn that they all went to their tasks as though they'd rehearsed them – this, though they hadn't had so much as a discussion. It's impressive, what James calls "the power of shared intent." Months later I will tell this to the man I call my Teacher, and he will say, "If you're able to go up with three or more people in multiple belief you can do incredible things." And he will say: "You have to learn to do ritual for yourself to survive. You have to have it to save your ass. Ritual has to be moved from the area of the special to the commonplace."

There is much I'll relate now that I learned later, when we all compared notes, but I'll just tell you how it happened.

While I am drifting in a kind of slow-motion state, not aware of the others, they are preparing as though for a sports event, stretching, breathing deep, doing neck exercises. In the house Zee lights a candle and says the names of my brothers, my sister, my father and my mother (none of whom she's met), invoking their spirits to help me. "I thought your blood should be there," she will say later. Diane tells Spider, "Don't use your head, use your heart. I want you to watch him. If you need to wrestle with him or dance with him, it's all right, just do whatever."

They unroll a long white sheet maybe 10 or 15 yards down the middle of the back yard. Which sounds like nothing. But an atmosphere has come upon us. As though if you say something it will echo in the Other World. Which perhaps is the definition of "sacred space," "ritual space." As in an outdoor movie set where, when the spots are turned on, the sunlight and the electric light blend into still a third light – the mood is like that, as they unroll the sheet, and set up a tall wooden column, and ask me where I want to stand. By the power of our shared intent, it is all happening in some strange third light.

I choose a spot. They ask me where I want them. I arrange them in an arc in front of me, except for Zee. She I place a little behind me and to my right – "flying my wing," I say. Protect me, my eyes tell her. I will, her eyes say.

"I am all the protection you need," whispers the grave. (Graves lie too.)

Diane asks me to talk. I am relieved that talking can be part of it – until I hear what I'm talking about. Then I'm frightened and disgusted, frightened at the nakedness, disgusted at the self-pity, my god, *listen* to me, have I been walking around this way for months? I'm ashamed of my pain, ashamed to be standing in front of them. I feel stupid to have consented to this.

Okay, so I'm talking. Fuck. I'm talking about writing. (Always a bad idea.) I'm being paid to write a screenplay about a writer who's going through a transformation, but *I'm* a writer going through a transformation, and I don't want to, I'm *afraid* of how I'm changing, so I can't write the thing.

"You'd rather die than write the screenplay?" James asks sarcastically.

"Yes."

And James' voice changes. His West Texas voice starts to sound like Clelia's, my mother's. He's taking her part. He's yelling at me. I want to kill him but I'm paralyzed, drained. What is *she* doing here? (*"She's only in the grave," the grave says, "and since the grave is everywhere, that's where she is, stupid."*) I was so happy such a short time ago. Now I'm crying (something I say I don't do often, but apparently I do it more often than I know), I'm talking about how the mission of my writing was to save my family, save them by justifying the pain, justify it by making something of it, so our poverty and insanity and failure as a family won't have been for nothing, so we won't have been defeated. But all I have to show for that is a book of rather careful essays and a dirty novel, and no one's been saved. *The dumb bastard can't decide if he's Oedipus or Jesus. Somebody change the channel.*

James is still Clelia. He's still haranguing me: I've failed, damn right I'm not good enough, I deserve to die. I haven't lost all my brains in one afternoon, I know he expects me to come back at him, fight Clelia through fighting him, but if I did, I'd be acting, and I don't even have the strength for that. I just can't. I let him say it and say it. And the dervish inside me grows so much bigger and stronger that I'm starting not to exist. It is so strange to stand here and not exist. I'm weeping. And I hear myself saying, "I've done enough, Mama."

I've done enough, Mama. Do you hear me? I've done enough.

James-Clelia is still yakking at me, but I'm saying this over and over, to myself or out loud, I don't know, but this isn't a breakthrough, it's the final step down and I know it, I am raising the white goddam flag. *La commedia finito,* or however you say it in god-damn Italian.

There is talk of my wife, talk of Zee, there's James-Clelia asking me why she doesn't have grandchildren, fuck-all!

"Where are your children?"

"Safe. They don't exist."

How did this yard, in this strange light, under this sweet wind, fill with so many swarming words, like gnats you have to keep brushing away from your face? I look at Diane. For the first time in 20 years, I can't read her expression. I look at Lora. Her eyes are so kind. Spider seems transfixed, both shocked and fascinated. Zee is crying. Strong tears. Clear-eyed. Just looking at me.

Life is turning, turning, something must happen here, I may not have any courage, sense or dignity left, but I have not gone this far only to deflate. Something *must* happen, and I will wait in this yard, this awful place, till by force of nothing but waiting I make it

happen, even if it's my death, how do you like that, motherfucker-James, what are you gonna say to the cops *then*?

Your Indian grave has floated from its hovering place to rest upon the surface of the ground. Your white man's grave has risen from its buried place to rest upon the surface of the ground. Don't be surprised that the ground itself, this lawn where you've known such love and care, is only a grave in disguise. Whitman told you about the leaves of grass, that every lawn is a grave, you knew that, or said you did, and read his line about "carrying the crescent child that carries its own full mother in its belly." Here is your grave, lie down.

Spider and James are so physically strong. Holding my arms they don't force me but guide me to the place on the lawn. The sheet is there. I *see* a grave.

James-Clelia won't shut up, the whole way to the grave he/she is taunting, taunting. I expected Mama to be sorry for me when this happened, I didn't expect her to be cackling with victory. It's a little hard to take, but I just don't have the energy to protest.

So they bury me there on the lone prairie. *Welcome, says the grave.* A sheet above, a sheet below, like an Indian but on the ground; then heavy things, I still don't know what they were, they felt like logs but were probably pillows, but really, they felt like logs, I couldn't move. I was very dark in my grave. Well, what would I expect but darkness there? And I got very cold. And I felt very silly.

I have come a long way to play an embarrassing game, it's not going to make any difference one way or the other.

You should know better. The grave always makes a difference.

I hear weeping. Zee is weeping. So are Lora and Diane. Spider's all choked up. They're not acting, they're weeping. Spider's saying he'd always admired me, and I had to go and do this. James is calling me a chickenshit. "Everything I heard about this guy, and look at him, he didn't even protest, he didn't even argue, he just let us lay him down. Chickenshit to the max."

It may have been a game, but my chest constricted in shame and grief. Wasn't anybody going to forgive me? That's why I'd wanted to die, so my wife wouldn't hate me anymore, so my stepson wouldn't think I was a failure anymore, so the dervish would go to the Other World (where it had always longed to go), so everyone would see how hard I'd tried. Wasn't that the deal I'd meant to strike with death? *Death doesn't deal.*

I know I had to go a long way, through lots of Sturm and Drang, to find that out, but my friends were teaching me that this sort of suicide was the one thing no one I loved would forgive me for. They would be angry at me for this for the rest of their lives. All my other failures and sillinesses, even my betrayals, were just life, and, since they know life, they could ultimately forgive me, as I would forgive them. But this – about this their anger would be implacable. Even if they didn't want it to be. Slowly their anger would eat away at their love. If this was all it was going to come to, I wasn't worth so damn much trouble.

But where have they gone? It's absolutely quiet except for the wind. And dogs barking. Where have they gone? What am I supposed to do?

Nothing, dummy. This is the grave, remember?

They have gone out of hearing range is where they've gone, and I will learn that they, too, are wondering what to do. Zee is crying. Lora is holding her. Diane says, "Let's dance." She puts on the k.d. lang tape.

I can't tell you how funny it seems, suddenly to be listening to k.d. lang from the grave. But the song is so touching, the voice so strong, so alive. "Out of nowhere this gust of wind," she's singing. And then that delicate mournful song about the abused child. This isn't funny anymore. I'm *in* her voice. In the middle of it. There's nothing but the dark and that voice.

The others are dancing quietly, each of them alone. Then, one by one, they stop. "How long do you think he'll stay under there?" James says. "I dunno," Zee says, "he's pretty stubborn." "Maybe we should go to a movie," says James.

Lora says, "He shouldn't be alone," and, unknown to me, goes and sits in a yoga position near what has become my grave.

I can't move. The grave of my imagination has blended with the grave they have created into something frightening and strong. Something rises in me that I cannot identify. I hear a stronger weeping, my own weeping, and I tell my mother, my wife, and everyone I've failed or betrayed, including my art, that I've had enough, that my begging for forgiveness is done, that I'm no longer willing to die for it.

Of course my actual mother, my actual wife, my actual lost friends would say, "What makes you think we wanted you to die, anyway? We're not interested in your goddamn histrionics. Go muck about in back yards all you want, but leave us out of it." Yet is anyone entirely innocent of the way they exist in another's heart? Every interaction is part conspiracy. Afterward, each person is both more and less than they were, and none of this has happened without some intent, however unconscious that intent may be.

Now I feel a lightness in this grave, a sweet lightness. R.D. Laing is talking to me! R.D. Laing, k.d. lang, maybe that's the connection, she's singing, he's talking and I hear one of his sentences whole and clear: "There are sudden, apparently inexplicable suicides that must be understood as the dawn of a hope so horrible and harrowing that it is unendurable."

Hope?

And I start to laugh. Laugh-cry, cry-laugh, I have been such a *dope*. I ALMOST KILLED MYSELF SEVERAL TIMES and I didn't even know that I was suffering not from despair but from *hope*. That's what this has been all about. A germ of hope – no, make that a wild hair – that would, if followed, invoke changes in my life that terrified me, and this terror was enough, almost enough, to kill me. Jesus H. Oedipus on a crutch. Did I really just die of *hope*? A hope I was afraid to live out? That would have been a weird thing to write on my death certificate. k.d. lang is singing, "Are you getting scared my dear?"

Less of some things, more of others, but at least it's nice to know what I'm *really* scared of.

Meanwhile, back at the patio, James asks Zee, "Are you angry?" "No," she says. "You don't have any anger about how he's wanted to die." "Yeah. I have anger, yes." "Why don't you go over there and kick him?" Spider chimes in with: "I want to get that dirt over there and put it on him." "Well, go ahead and do it," James says. "I'll help," says Zee.

In fact, they're all angrier over my foolishness than they'd realized, they all seem to think shoving dirt on me is a high idea and they get shovels and such and walk over to a pile of gravel.

If you're under a sheet and weighted down with things for the whole length of your body, it is a strange thing to feel the weight suddenly change and get weightier, in sharp hard bolts as something, you don't know what, hits you and makes a strange sound.

Gravel weighs a lot. And then, quite painfully, a large pack of it smacks into my face – Zee, really mad now, scooping a whole shovelful and not caring how hard it hits.

Enough is enough. I'm going to get up now. Or am I? What makes me linger a little longer is that I have grown to like this grave. It has taught me what I didn't know how to learn from any teacher, friend, lover or therapist. I start to rise, but it's almost too much, there's too much weight on me. I get a little panicky, which gives me the strength, and I rise, lifting the dirt and the other things off me, and the light hurts my eyes.

The Indian grave rises back into the air, the white man's grave burrows back into the ground. I will visit Diane's again and again in my life. I will stand at that place. I will think, "What a fine day that was. How willing we were to risk any awkwardness to reach each other. What a strange, funny, lovely day when my friends helped me get my life back. What enormous power raw ritual has."

As my eyes adjust to the light I expect my friends to be glad to see me. They tell me later that I was crying at this moment, but I'm not aware of it now. I'm just aware that they don't seem glad to see me. James growls and charges me, yelling, "Stay down there!" Spider, too, then the women (none of whom is a fragile flower). On a normal day neither Spider nor James would have much trouble taking me, but at this moment, my feet plant themselves so solidly that it takes all five of them to get me down, and by then we are all laughing as we all fall, like children, patty-cake, patty-cake, all fall down.

It's amazing how much silliness you have to endure in order to learn something about yourself.

We lie there all entangled, Zee with her head on my legs, holding my hand, my head on James' chest, and I'm crying again, I would have thought that it was over now, but Diane has disappeared, and Miles Davis' "Sketches of Spain" fills the yard. "Zee doesn't want to come home to a little boy anymore," James says. (Alas, the grave hadn't addressed that and I couldn't change fast enough.) Diane appears again. I'm supposed to dance.

Alone? In front of everybody?

But I find myself dancing. I don't care if it's alone and in front of everybody. The body that has tasted the grave needs to dance, quite apart from whatever bullshit I happen to be thinking. How strange for my body to be doing this, to not really care that I'm embarrassed. It's really trying to get inside Miles Davis' tone and move there, it doesn't much care about what it looks like. I feel electrical charges run up and down my arms, across my shoulders, across my forehead, up and down my back.

Diane tells Zee, "Go dance with him, mirror him, make him mirror you." So Zee and I dance. Spider and Lora dance around us, holding that long thin white sheet, and they begin wrapping it around us. Finally, we stand still, Zee and I. We talk softly. The others seem to have gone away. But they haven't, they've just stepped out of our line of sight. When we turn toward them, they're standing under a tree.

I'm a city kid, I don't know from trees. It's about three stories tall and bends over the yard making a wide, shady space. There's a song Zee and I love, a Robbie Robertson song with the line, "I will meet you by the Witness Tree." That is the species of tree this is. A Witness Tree. There are new religious feelings happening, new religious techniques, new in the sense that anything is new: a recent combination of ancient elements. It may be necessary for survival. And this is what is being witnessed now. By James, Diane, Spider and Lora, standing under the Witness Tree. They are asking us to join them. And the manner of their asking reminds me of a line in Robert Bly's

translation of a poem by Tomas Tranströmer: “. . . a biblical saying never set down: ‘Come unto me, for I am as full of contradictions as you.’”

James blesses the four directions as he’s learned from the Indians. Spider takes my boots and socks off. Holding me strongly he leads me into the fire circle. They have made concentric circles in the ashes of last night’s fire, the ashes are still hot, they sting my feet. The stinging feels good.

James says, “Standing in the circle, you’re standing on the shoulders of your ancestors.”

I have not had many visions in my life, but at this moment I have one. That’s why I am here to tell you that this ritual stuff is for real. As James speaks of ancestors and descendants both of blood and of spirit, and asks whether I promise, in this company, to be responsible to those ancestors and descendants and our spiritual kin for the rest of my life, and as I promise, this is what I see:

I see my mother’s face enormous in front of me. But when James says the word “ancestors” her face gets smaller, gets human-size, and I see Clelia at about age 55, in her favorite house dress, her hair in bobby-pinned curls, smiling seriously, gently, and moving toward a crowd, a quiet but very very large group of people who stand attentively awaiting her: our ancestors.

What a wave of comfort comes from them to me in this moment. Even the meaning of that comfort comes to me, though not in so many words: that your mother is your mother, your father is your father, and they can’t help but have a mythic dimension in your psyche, but –they are only two of many, many many many, who go back and back in time, and whom you will someday join. No agony of mine can buy peace for Clelia, but no agony of hers is too much for the touch of all our ancestors to soothe. In this realm, mother and father are not immense presences overwhelming the psyche – they are not alone in the Other World, so they are not alone in your psyche. They are accompanied by the ancestors you share with them. As a Western person, you have to look for those ancestors, you have to go out of your way sometimes for them to appear, for you to feel their great soothing presence, but they are there, and they can welcome your parents and soothe them the way you tried to and never could because no children can. And, with all their shared experience, they can understand you, too.

I feel the smiling of my ancestors around the Witness Tree. I see my friends smiling. I feel more fortunate than I can say.

Zee joined me in the circle. We had felt from the first day we met that somehow we’d come from the same family, and that feeling was strong as we stood on those ashes. A cup was passed around from which we all drank. My ancestors made a large circle around us, which the others couldn’t see, which I could no longer see, but I felt it so strongly. The spirits that welcomed us when Zee gave Diane the Fiji necklace, and that had helped us begin, seemed to be back, the air had their gentle quality, and we all sat in chairs around the fire pit, smiling wearily, thinking it was over.

It wasn’t, amazingly enough. We thought we were finished with the ritual, but the ritual wasn’t finished with us. We began to speak of what had just happened, the way you speak of a storm after it passes. I learned that the images Diane and James had conceived for me were that I go into a grave, and if I chose to arise from that grave, I had to dance. But the manner in which this would happen is left to the moment. The progress of going through these images gave me my vision. As we continued to speak of the ritual, assuming it was over, the ritual sought out Zee. She began to speak, we began to react,

and to everyone's surprise, the ritual resumed. It was now *her* work – but that's not my story to tell.

As for me, I was cured of suicide. Not of crackups – I crack up pretty regularly and probably always will. That's just life for some of us. I've had some bad ones since, and that's how I know the day of the Witness Tree cured me of suicide, because no matter how bad the crackups have been (and one was a doozy, believe me) suicide is no longer a possibility. I don't think it ever will be again. I gave my word in that circle to my friends and my ancestors and my descendents – which means that my entire psyche, every level and cranny of it, heard that promise. And I had been stripped down enough so that my word was not (as it so often had been) a pose. It was all I had left. I am a stronger priest now, for myself, for my friends.

And on that day my mother and I began to love each other again, truly – she from the Other World, me from this one. Now we talk again, laugh again. She's there in that Other World to be called on, a powerful helper. I bless her, and she me.

And the dervish – still does what it does in me, and that's as it should be.

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