

A DANCE AMONG THE RUINS

By Michael Ventura

May 3, 1991

It's been many, many years since I went back to Beekman Avenue in the South Bronx, or Decatur Street in Brooklyn, and I have put myself many miles from them, but they follow me in my dreams. Even before crack, arson and kids armed with automatic weapons, these streets were places of hunger, fear and the look that parents get when they have lived with the knowledge that they cannot protect their children. It was in these places that my mother taught me to read. She let me know, not through lectures but through her presence, that to read and to survive were, for me, absolutely linked. On the fire escapes and rooftops, I read to survive.

I must have been 10 when I read my first novel. It was the spring of 1956. I happened on it in the children's section of the library: *Star Man's Son* by Andre Norton, a science-fiction tale written in 1952 about the descendants of nuclear-war survivors. I've found the book since. Norton could write. Unlike most pop prose, Norton's has sonority and a sense of rhythm. The sentences are suggestive. "These broken messages only babbled of the death of the world." "Landmarks on the old maps were now gone, or else so altered by time that a man might pass a turning point and never know it." (Did I sense that I must live in that existential landscape the rest of my life?)

The story is about a young man from a tribe deep in the wilderness who sets out to find and explore the legendary ruined cities of the Old Ones. On my fire escape I knew he was coming toward me, that I was one of the Old Ones who populated the place for which he had such awe. In the novel, the city's been spared a direct hit, but radiation has killed us, our bones lie everywhere and time has left the streets ruptured, the buildings slowly crumbling. The passage that struck me most deeply, and which I have searched out after all this time to read to you, was after the hero walks up a great, wide staircase into a building that's not like the rest – a place I took to be the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

"He wandered through the high-ceilinged rooms, his boots making splotchy tracks in the fine dust crisscrossed with the spoor of small animals. He brushed the dust from the tops of cases and tried to spell out the blotched and faded signs. Grotesque stone heads leered or stared blindly through the murk, and tatters of powdery canvas hung dismally from worm-eaten frames in what had once been picture galleries."

What I am about to say may seem perverse, but so be it: these words are among the most liberating I have ever read. Of course I couldn't articulate this at the time, even to myself, but I remember the sense of the revelation: the city was vulnerable! Was as vulnerable, in its way, as I. This city, this enormous entity, existing all around me yet entirely beyond me, beyond my ability to influence or perhaps even survive it – this city could, would, someday fall. It too was weak; it too had something to be afraid of. For I knew in my bones, beyond question, that the city was not on my side. So if the city, too, could be afraid, that gave me a little power.

I was especially happy that the museums would not last. My mother took me to them often (the city museums were free in those days). I loved the Museum of Natural History, the dinosaurs especially; I thought of them as enormous rats, I fought them in

my fantasies. But the Metropolitan Museum of Art – my mother loved it, but it made me afraid. The people there were different. Our best clothes weren't as good as their casuals. They spoke strangely, so clearly and carefully. No matter what their words said, their voices sounded flat and bored. And if they spoke to us, it was with that slight thickening of the voice that people have when they visit the sick in hospitals. We were treated with a deference that dismissed us.

But it was the art that made me most afraid. What was it about? *Who* was it about? Here and there I would recognize something as almost human, almost natural (“natural,” for me, meant the street); but “almost” wasn't near enough. Every hall, every wall, had one message for me, and it was the same message I saw on television: “You don't exist.”

You can see the contradiction in the sentence. In order to say, “You don't exist,” there has to be a “you” to say it to. So you *do* exist: you exist just enough to be told that you don't. They will entice you into the museum, but within the museum they will obliterate you; they will seduce you with television, but on television you will either be denied or lied about. The shrinks tell us that the surest way to drive people crazy is to give them a double signal: two contradictory messages at the same time. The poor know that this theory is correct.

Even to a boy it was clear that the museum thought itself superior to the television, but both institutions wanted nothing to do with my people, the working people of the street, without whom the world does not function; so the museum seemed to me a quieter, more spacious, more dignified version of the television. Television bombards us with negative images of anyone excluded from affluence, while the museum defines “beauty” as anything accepted by affluence. To be led by the hand into what is advertised as a palace of beauty, and to see no image of one's kind or one's world, is to be told in no uncertain terms that you are not beautiful.

You're supposed to appreciate this. You're supposed to take this in as knowledge, and be grateful for it. And you try, because God knows you're hungry for beauty, and the way the painting is being used is not the painting's fault. But the institution changes the power and inflection of its beauty.

Being a child, I did not, could not, allow myself to admit my growing rage at being told in so many ways that because I was poor I did not exist. But the rage was building within me, and it was this rage that was appeased and gratified by “tatters of powdery canvas hung dismally from worm-eaten frames.” The atomic bomb frightened me; but at the same time my rage was pleased to know that, like me, the city could die in an instant.

It didn't take a bomb. Just some of what one day will be studied (or forgotten?) as American history. The city is in ruins. Not that small, comparatively tame section of Manhattan which people in L.A. refer to as “New York” and people in Brooklyn refer to as “the city”; but the rest of it, which is ruined or about to be.

In March I spent one day there, for an afternoon with my brother and to visit my mother's grave. For the first time in 20-odd years I drove through the old neighborhoods, miles and miles of the old neighborhoods. There's no need to describe them. You've seen the same footage I have, and the footage is accurate, as far as it goes. Rubble; charred skeletons of buildings; gangs; the homeless; burnt hulks of cars. It looks much like the descriptions in my old science-fiction novel. But there are details the camera people tend to leave out, and, as usual, these details completely change the context of what you see:

hundreds of quite functional cars parked everywhere, and thousands of people going about their daily lives amidst the ruins.

These people do not look tragic or abandoned or hopeless. They look just like people going about their business everywhere, except that they both look a little more tired and a little more alert. The point is, in an environment that the affluent would think of as impossible and unlivable, they are living. The enormous pressures they are under show up in every sort of statistic, from health studies to crime to education; but tens of thousands of people are – just living.

You can see why this daily life is not alluded to on our various media. The fact that something like “daily life” can exist in the ruins turns American values upside down. If you can still have something like a life with so little, then who needs so much? If art and language and music can flourish as they do here, so that the whole country is imitating them, what does that mean?

I think of what the anarchist leader Buenaventura Durruti said during the Spanish Civil War some weeks before he was killed. He was being interviewed by Pierre Van Paassen of the *Toronto Daily Star*. Van Paassen was impressed by Durruti and sympathetic to the Spanish workers, but he had no illusions about the human cost of such a war, even if the workers won. He said to Durruti, “You will be sitting on top of a pile of ruins even if you are victorious.”

Durruti said, “We have always lived in the slums and the holes in the wall. We will know how to accommodate ourselves for a time. For you must not forget that we can also build these palaces, these cities, here in Spain and in America and everywhere. We, the workers. We can build others to take their place. And better ones. We are not in the least afraid of ruins. We are going to inherit the earth. There is not the slightest doubt about that. The bourgeoisie might blast and ruin its own world before it leaves the stage of history. We carry a new world here, in our hearts. That world is growing in this minute.”

Durruti had no doubt; I do. Durruti was a violent man and believed violence could help; I’m not and I don’t. But he was so right about the ruins. People who can dance in them have nothing in this society to protect. Our beauty isn’t in the museums. Our sustenance isn’t in the economy. There is a difference between helping this society survive and helping humanity survive. We have to learn that difference. Society is always and merely a form. We are the content. This society is disposable. We are not.

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