

## ***A SWEETNESS OF BRICK***

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New York City is a place that keeps showing up elsewhere.

When Luxor Las Vegas opened in 1993, its massive pyramidal structure, filled with well-replicated artifacts of ancient Egypt, featured a model of midtown Manhattan on the casino floor, several stories high. I admired the audacity of it; there was something right about a Manhattan surrounded by the goddesses and gods of Egypt's lively underworld.

Atop Luxor's Chrysler Building, a spindly monkey clung to the spire. A woman said, "That must be King Kong." "King Kong climbed the Empire State," said her companion, "not the Chrysler."

King Kong, as we know, never climbed anything, being a brilliantly manipulated doll atop another model of Manhattan in a Hollywood studio. Manhattan gets around.

New York-New York Las Vegas, a building designed to look like Manhattan's skyline, opened in 1997, across the street from the castle décor of Excalibur and kitty-corner to the Tropicana, where the entrance featured Easter Island's mighty heads. They stared blankly at New York-New York's 150-foot Statue of Liberty, her face eerily similar to Marilyn Monroe's. Kitsch surrealism. It was crazy, but also somehow right, to see Manhattan's skyline (prophetically minus the Twin Towers) gleam in the Mojave Desert.

Manhattan, where skyscrapers originated, is now replicated everywhere, from Austin to Singapore, from Rome to Mecca. Every city with a high jagged skyline can't help but echo the original.

Growing up in New York City, Manhattan seemed as exotic as if I'd come from Kansas. Harlem, Greenwich Village, Wall Street, Times Square, Hell's Kitchen – Manhattan's grandeur, arts, dangers, and pleasures were the city the world imagined. Not Brooklyn or the Bronx, the New York I knew. Our neighborhoods were bleak expanses of working-class tenement sameness, and none were famous unless they were very bad. Even so, their fame was local. "I'll kick yur ass from he'ah t'Canarsie!" was a common threat among us, but it made no sense to anyone in New England or west of New Jersey.

For me, the spookiest replications of New York City had nothing to do with its grander icons.

In Los Angeles, one winter night in 1978, I drove for the first time through the Pico Boulevard gate of 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox. I was there to preview a film. That movie paled in interest when I saw, directly past the studio gate, an elevated railway station like Brooklyn's Myrtle Avenue El. Once I'd lived directly under that El. Then I saw tenements like those on Brooklyn's Decatur Street, where I had lived – actually, they were facades for office buildings, but in the dark they looked real enough. Then more tenements, hollow in back, very real in front. I forgot the movie and walked make-believe streets very like the streets I'd escaped years before. I felt alone again in Brooklyn, as I'd been as a boy, after my family imploded and I was truly alone, on the streets, with no one to call, no money, and nowhere to go but further on.

Not long after, at the Burbank Studios, I walked a more realistic street of brownstone tenement sets. Those years in L.A. when I had a preview at Burbank, I'd walk that make-believe street, very like Decatur Street

(“where,” a shrink told me, “you became you”). Wonderful and frightening, to walk a dream-street where nobody lived and to feel both the lost boy I’d been and the man I’d become. “Here we are again,” I’d say to several of my selves, “just the same and completely different.” Sometimes I’d think of a Terry Allen line: “This is real life.”

Well into my 50s, friends would sometimes ask why I hadn’t written a novel about my childhood. I’d answer: “I’m not old enough yet.”

It takes a long time to distinguish between one’s own sadness and the sadness of life.

See, I didn’t want to write a story about my particular experience of hunger, violence, abandonment, abuse, eviction, insanity, helplessness, longing. My particular story didn’t matter. Millions live that way. That’s what mattered and what matters. I couldn’t write it until it became, in my heart, not my story but a story of all of us – “us,” the poor, everywhere. I’d gotten out, as some few do, but I had to get to where I could write it as the story of the many who don’t get out as well as the story that was mine. Because nobody gets out all the way. Those few who do cannot forget the eyes and hungers of everyone they’ve left behind. I wanted to make that moment real, the moment of betwixt and between, the moment when maybe you’ll be saved or maybe you’ll be lost forever. I wanted to bring a reader into that moment when you’ll probably be doomed but, just maybe, something or someone may intervene – that moment of suspension just before you fall into the chasm or, miraculously, you do not.

That kind of story has nothing to do with iconic skylines.

Whenever New York showed up again for me, in the Mojave or Hollywood or Austin (as I watched Austin grow its phantasmagoric profile), the New York I never left, the New York within me, became more alive.

Finally, as I was turning 60, I wrote it: *A Sweetness of Brick* – a novella of the sweetness of our spirits, the grace of our toughness, and the terrors of our poverty. Brooklyn as I knew it. Agents and publishers were uninterested and I couldn’t blame them; my novel wasn’t likely to turn a profit or break even. But I knew I’d gotten it right in *A Sweetness of Brick*. One way or another, sooner or later, it would find its way into the world.

Then something happened that I found impossibly strange: My former students and the adult offspring of friends moved to Brooklyn! Brooklyn had become cool! An international destination for young folk and a habitation of yuppies! A Brooklyn of cafés; clubs; hip young white people; festive streets! Not all of Brooklyn, but big chunks. A French friend, the translator Simon Baril, who’d read *Sweetness* in manuscript, explored this magical manifestation of Brooklyn. Graciously, he made a pilgrimage to my Decatur Street. He reported feeling no danger. And he saw a Santa Monica-type white gal walking her fancy dog (there goes the neighborhood). I read of chichi wine shops opening near my old address, 1286 Decatur St., and I thought of a saying of my mother’s: “Close the doors, they’re coming through the windows! Close the windows, they’re coming through the doors!”

I left that city decades ago and never missed it. Yet now, with the Brooklyn that shaped me gone but for its buildings -- now that it exists only in memory, now that the home I never fully left is finally really gone – I realize that *A Sweetness of Brick* is yet another replica, kin to that Manhattan model King Kong climbed. It is time, then, to put *Sweetness* out there, and let it take its place among the replicas.

Go to [www.michaelventura.org](http://www.michaelventura.org). Click on “Ventura’s Unpublished Works.” There’s *A Sweetness of Brick*, free of charge, with its own Brooklyn Bridge.

In high school I wrote a poem that ended: “Love is a bridge.”

My brother Aldo added: “A bridge to your lost experience.”

Writing *Sweetness*, I realized that, in spite of hell, I loved that time, that Brooklyn. I realized that only my love could make it expressible.

It takes a long time to distinguish between one’s own sadness and the sadness of life.

I spent my young manhood learning to be tough, in my own way, but I was never much of a street fighter. My brother Aldo was the best street fighter I ever saw. *A Sweetness of Brick* tries to embody a line he wrote: “My love is an imperfect thing but it sings.”

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