

## ***AN INDEFINITE MOVEMENT OF LIGHT***

**By Michael Ventura**

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Snow falling without wind or even a breeze ... thick white wet flakes, glittering, reflecting the streetlamps' light as they fell ... the gentleness of their descent and the harshness of the air, damp bone-aching cold ... and each individual entity of a snowflake suddenly anonymous in the deep drifts. I would stand at the window, look up, try to fix my gaze on one flake as it entered the cone of the streetlamp's glare, watch it fall till it disappeared in the untracked whiteness that covered the town ... or the windowpane had frosted, and the snow on the far side of its glass appeared as an indefinite movement of light, neither beckoning nor forbidding. It was a beauty that needed nothing to express or record it, needed no one to protect or love it, terribly cold yet a-shimmer with a vague but powerful invitation. I had been reading Rilke in C.F. MacIntyre's translations, my favorite poem was called "Initiation": *Whoever you are, go out into the evening,/Leaving your room of which you know each bit;/your house is the last before the infinite,/whoever you are.*

And those disturbing lines from Rilke's "First Duino Elegy": For beauty is nothing/but the beginning of terror we can just barely endure ... All this was assignment. But could you handle it? ... Remember: the hero keeps going, and even his ruin/was only a subterfuge for achieving his final birth. I was 16, 17, and wanted of course to be a hero. I considered myself a representative of my people: the poor. Like all who've lived in extreme poverty, I'd known hunger and violence, seen madness close up, and had lived the unending sense of near-panic in which no equilibrium is possible and any day can bring disasters, until disaster is felt as a way of life. Years of that. The slight changes in my mother's face over weeks and months as insanity gained momentum behind her eyes; then, one day, the swiftness with which her eyes became so incredibly beautiful and fearsome. So beauty is nothing/but the beginning of terror explained something to me. But hadn't she also insisted, in so many ways, that beauty was the one overwhelming fact, the one thing we must never forget and to which we must always remain loyal? With her humility and defiance melding into one expression she would say, "Who are we to lose hope?"

(Decades later I wrote almost off-handedly in one of these columns: Trouble and beauty are the building blocks of the universe.)

And all of this seemed included in the snowfall, when the snow fell without wind, when I was 16, 17. I was well-fed now, but nothing could make me safe, nothing could make anyone safe. Mama was in a mental hospital on Long Island, my brothers and sister were in a Catholic children's home up the Hudson River, I was a foster child in the parsonage of a Unitarian minister's family in Waterville, Maine, watching snow, in a house the size of four or five of the tenement apartments where my family had lived in Brooklyn and the Bronx. In that house I was learning that people who are well-fed and who do not live in fear of eviction, nor fear of the electricity and heat being shut off for non-payment, nor fear of violence, people who'd never feared anything poor people fear - even such people suffer terribly, are frightened of each other, frightened of the world, frightened of themselves. I can not express how astounded I was at this discovery, and how difficult it was to believe, even with the evidence every day in front of my eyes.

Safety was not a human possibility. Money could not solve fear or suffering, and would not have saved my family from fear and suffering. In some ways this was the most surprising lesson of my life. And that was all present in my wordlessness as I watched the snow.

My urgent, helpless love -- as desirous and unknown to itself as the love of anyone that age -- was insensible to boundaries. Much later I would pay lots of money to hear psychologists tell me that this was because of the incest and abuse I suffered as a child. It wasn't money wasted. They had their points, those psychologists, and they taught me to look at my life in new ways; at the very least they kept me company as I searched out my past, and that alone was worth a great deal. But now I would say that love, if it is love, is insensible to boundaries. The greatest boundary of all, the immense gulf between a me and a you -- that's a boundary which love, against all eventual experience, resolutely refuses to recognize. Love, like art, is a continual and mysteriously renewable defiance of limitation. As Octavio Paz writes, "we do not ask [love] for happiness or repose, but simply for an instant of that full life in which opposites vanish ..." Often we know this more completely when young and incapable of understanding anything but the surface sheen of such words. Like so many at that time of life, watching those snowfalls I was in a way nothing but love, baffled, incapable as yet of comprehension or fulfillment, but loving. (Later we call that state "innocence," but is it really? Longing, when untested, still possesses all the latent elements that will be discovered during the inevitable tests.)

I discovered I was an artist when I was that boy, far from my birthplace and family, during those winters of wind-torn or windless snows. It would take some years for this discovery to become definite -- some years before I would live within the fact of being an artist, rather than within the puzzling discovery itself. At the heart of the discovery is an astonished sense of necessity: "*I have to do this! How very strange! But I absolutely must.*" Traversing those first years that are so dangerous in the life an artist, aren't we just gauging the depths of that necessity, and secretly hoping that we can free ourselves from it? Sooner than they would have thought possible, most escape the necessity's gravitational pull and then lead more or less conventional lives, outwardly disappointed but inwardly (if they'd only admit it) relieved. Those who can't escape it know that the basic movement of art isn't rebellion but surrender -- surrender to the art, to the gift. "I am here to serve my gift. It doesn't matter how limited or small it really is, or what anyone else will make of it. I am in service to my gift." To be an artist is to live a life of service.

I was reading Conrad that winter, *Lord Jim*, and now I know what I only vaguely intuited then, that the service I speak of is what the Conrad's old Stein means when he says, "The way is to the destructive element submit yourself, and with the exertions of your hands and feet in the water, make the deep, deep sea keep you up ... In the destructive element immerse ... To follow the dream and again to follow the dream ..." And that connected with Rilke's *Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge*: "To write one line, a man ought to see many cities, people, and things ... One must be able to think back the way to unknown places ... to partings long foreseen, to days of childhood ... to nights of travel ... and one must have memories of many nights of love, no two alike ..." An invitation to adventure. That passage begins: "For poetry isn't, as people imagine, merely feelings (these come soon enough); it is experiences."

That Unitarian family went to sleep at a decent hour. I would sit in the kitchen, by the stove, its warmth at my back. There'd be my cups of instant coffee, my cigarettes, my Olympia manual portable typewriter, the night, the snow. (I miss the crisp clacks of that

machine. Computers click too quietly.) And I would write. And write. My ability was meager, my enthusiasm was immense. Hemingway's great instruction -- to write the truest sentence you know in that moment, and then the truest sentence you know in the next moment -- got me through (and still does). In those days, dependably, from sometime around Thanksgiving and often into April, snow covered everything outside, so even on nights without snowfall there was the silent permeating presence of snow. I'd discovered the great last paragraph of Joyce's *The Dead*: "It had begun to snow again. He watched sleepily the flakes, silver and dark, falling obliquely against the lamplight. The time had come for him to set out on his journey westward. Yes, the newspapers were right: snow was general all over Ireland. It was falling on every part of the dark central plain, on the treeless hills, falling softly ..."

The snow connected me to Joyce, to Conrad watching snows disappear into the sea, to Rilke on his journeys in Russia, to Hemingway's republican fighters in the snowy mountains of Spain ... I was young and tireless, writing all night, and then there would be what Ingmar Bergman called "the hour of the wolf," the moments before dawn, the snows of that Maine town taking on the soft deep blue of that hour, blue snow, and without a coat and sometimes without shoes and socks I would step outside, thrilled by the cold, newfallen snow glistening in the lamplight, an indigo sparkling at that vaguely holy hour, and I knew a delight, a quiet and whole joy, that then and across all these years conveyed the matter of who I really am, I, you, we.

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