

FROM A WRITER'S NOTEBOOK

By Michael Ventura

October 1, 1999

September 6: The people you lie to, they own you. They own the part of you that needs the lie to face them. The part of you that's afraid of them and afraid of yourself. When the truth is out there's nowhere to hide, nobody owns anybody, everybody just has to deal with what's real. Lies are static -- an attempt to freeze reality into an object that can be controlled. But the real is always changing, every moment, which is how the truth always leaves you a way out or a way through. ("The truth has that way of stepping beyond itself," Kathleen said.) The truth will get you out of a jam faster than a lie, because the truth will always make things change. Writers get dull when we stifle the contradictions in ourselves; that stifling is a lie; but our very paradoxes give meaning its movement, the force it needs to take the next step. ("The truth'll set you free," Deborah said, "after it makes you cry and ruins your day.")

September 7: This window: 12 square panes; two wood rectangles of six apiece; it opens on a little porch; there's a wood stairway one flight up from the alley, then the window; it would be child's play to cut or break a single large pane and steal into the apartment, but six smaller panes, each bordered by beveled wood -- there's no soft way to crack wood. So the construction is a cheap, elegant device against intrusion. Well, I'm definitely against intrusion -- didn't leave a forwarding number or address at the old place. People like me, stripped of any sense of security when very young, never have homes; we have hideouts, and some are homier than others. In this, the first domicile of our marriage, the feeling of "hideout" is subdued and is not the point -- though it's still *a* point, one's nature doesn't utterly change with a vow, the vow merely indicates the direction in which you desire to change, and the commitment to that change. But I started to say that yesterday the sun shone with a particular gleam on the white-painted beveled wood of that 12-paned window, and the sun's gleam on the wood -- there is a light that reaches into all things and of which all things are made, including me, and including the love in me, and this light does not need an excuse to be, or a reason, and I don't either. The light all around us *is* the vow. We took it when we opened our eyes.

September 8: If there were a way *not* to write -- I find myself wishing for that in my many moments of weakness, because I do not know how to express how tired I am of seeing what I see. How tired the seeing makes me, even the beautiful seeing, because it is incessant and it is growing, my seeing, and I can hardly keep up with it. That is the nature of the gift, the gift that so entralls the artist when young, when you don't yet grasp the responsibility of it. Thirty or 40 years later, if you've been true to the gift -- then you're constantly overwhelmed by your seeing, and constantly inadequate to your seeing, but the seeing goes on and on, even in the dark, artists *cannot* close their eyes, they only appear to sleep, the seeing still consumes them -- the constant effort not to let your small self get in the way of this larger seeing, and the constant failure of that effort, the seeing and the self colliding and interfering with each other, the constant striving to know the difference

between them -- you get tired, you wish for another way to live, you close your eyes, the seeing doesn't stop, you open your eyes, you write.

September 9: As usual, now I'm awake; finally. It is 1:33am. It may be the whiskey that wakes me; it confers a wakefulness, brief, excited, and about to fall -- to fall to sleep. A false wakefulness, then, false to everything but my spirit. False to my body, vice-induced, but real in itself. The false is real in itself. (Remember that. It's upsetting, but remember it anyway.) I am awake and she is asleep and soon I'll be asleep beside her -- for this is the kind of wakefulness that fails quickly. Those moments when my wakefulness yearns for nothing but sleep and I go to bed, and she stirs, her sleepiness stirs to welcome me, and then we dream separately but beside each other, ready to reach out for each other in happiness or terror, whatever the dream demands. The dream is so strong when it envelops us, then falls apart so quickly. We turn to each other, warm under the sheets. One day the moment will come: one of us will be alive when the other is dead. And that moment will go on until the one alive is also dead. Sudden wakefulness, sudden death, and these moments of dreaming beside each other -- that is the entire history of the race of human beings. The entire history. Merciless and generous.

September 10: John Cassavetes told of a conversation with his father when he, John, was a young actor, his father telling him that it was a privilege to be an actor -- a privilege, because so many people cannot cry their tears or laugh their laughter, cannot grieve as they desire, cannot afford to show their anger all the way, or their longing, or their fear -- and the actor has the immense privilege of doing all these things, over and over -- and a great actor does it in the name of all humanity -- and when an actor has *that* at heart then the audience feels it and recognizes it and is strengthened by it. (Ellen Barkin on Marlon Brando: "When he's on that screen he's telling a secret about himself that's not for sale.") We were talking in John's house, at his bar, whiskey and cigarettes, nearly dawn, after shooting into the wee hours, that summer when he directed *Love Streams* and learned that he was dying. No artist, John was telling me, his eyes fiery, no artist acts alone, writes alone, paints alone. It isn't *self-expression*, it's the expression of the most poignant and vivid moments of your humanity, your *humanity* -- so it's about and belongs to all humanity, no matter how private it may seem to you, it's not yours, it's everybody's, and it's for anybody who can use it. "That's why an artist is never alone." And then that devilish laugh: "We're just *alone*! But -- we're never -- alone."

September 11: I can't remember the first time I tried to write. Was I 12? It was in that tenement in Brooklyn, on the fire-escape or the roof, on Decatur Street, just up the block (I learned decades later) from where Henry Miller grew up, but I can't remember just when I first wrote, or what. Can't remember if I showed it to anybody. Can't remember if I liked it or didn't, if I threw it out or lost it, if I was shy about it or proud. I was saving my life. I was making the choice, taking the step, leaving home and family, putting myself out into the world, searching for the friends I would one day have, beginning the trade I would one day earn my keep by, but I can't remember anything about it. Were the words light or heavy under my fingers? Did I surprise myself? Did I feel, in any way, that this was the most important step I would take ever in my life? I know nothing about that day. It is a secret kept from me.

September 12: On my shelves, the books of my friends -- those for whom the word "writing" means to them what it does to me. Steve Erickson, Stanley Crawford, Jill Neimark -- their novels. Robert Bly, Sharon Doubiago, Karen Holden -- their poems. George Howard, James Hillman, Mike Rose -- their thoughts. They sit in council on my shelves, witnessing me and witnessing for me. History will probably forget all of us, but that gets less and less important to me as I grow older. What is history? The migration of humanity through Time. For we are a nomadic race, moving across a vast continent of Time, unable to stand still, unable to go back, unable to resist the incessant movement not "forward" but "across" time. That we go forward is probably illusion; but we are certainly crossing an expanse. We don't know where we came from and there is no certainty that we have a destination, but we are certainly moving across plains and oceans and mountain ranges of Time. The different qualities of our epochs may not be due to our natures at all, but to the different terrains of Time over which we pass -- walking across tundra does not create the same kind of history as sludging through swampland or climbing (or descending) great mountains. And we do not know what will end our journey; only that it will, one day, end. The journey of our species across Time will be over. And it will be left for Time itself to remember us, because we will not be there to remember ourselves. So this council on my shelves, the art and thought of my writing friends, sits calmly yet in haste. There is not much time to do what we do. There is not much time to be human.

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