

JOURNEY TOWARD A NOVEL

By Michael Ventura

October 16, 1998:

"Obsession remains the price of creation," wrote Nelson Algren, "and the writer who declines that risk will come up with nothing." Two years overdue at the publisher's, finally this novel, my fourth, is done. (It concerns a Marilyn Monroe impersonator in Vegas.) For some of us, to delve into our obsession is to go where madness thrives. There was a time last spring when I thought I wouldn't have the stuff to finish this book. I wrote a letter to a friend. I offer part of that letter here -- with its fragmented punctuation, run-on sentences, and crazed leaps -- in hopes it may be useful to others trying to get to the root of their passions. For what can we offer each other, finally, but the torn, hastily sketched, and always incomplete map of our journey?

Marilyn is such a strange messenger. A year or so ago, in Vegas, I dreamt she and I were walking barefoot on a beach, and she was wearing a sequined gown, and each sequin was a tiny screen on which the images of this horrible and wondrous century passed, while we talked and laughed.

There is a memory that just struck me:

I was seven years old, in the house alone, watching television, a World War II documentary, and suddenly there was footage of Auschwitz, the naked emaciated bodies being bulldozed into pits ... I can still remember the feel and tone of the room, of the whole house (the only actual "house" my apartment-hopping family ever lived in), how big the house was and how small I felt (and what was a 7-year-old doing in the house alone? I don't know.) ... I remember the shock of absorbing the absolutely irreducible fact of what I was seeing: the naked, impossibly skinny bodies, the women's breasts and the men's genitals flopping listlessly as the bulldozer moved them into the pit, the expressionless faces of the corpses (I know that this was my first time seeing adult naked bodies, for I never saw my parents naked), and I remember my state of shock, a combination of numbness and utter vulnerability, no way to feel what I was seeing and no way not to feel it, no defenses ... I'd been told that God created *everything*, so now what could I think but that God had created Auschwitz too? This, above all, was terrifying ... at the same time, during that same period, my parents were a part of a Communist group, it was the McCarthy era, the Rosenbergs were about to be executed, I didn't know all this of course but there was an air of terror in the house, my mother and father (as both told me much later) were terrified, always afraid they were being followed, afraid they were about to be arrested ... also my mother was going insane, her first "breakdown," and the changes in her seemed so fantastic and sinister to little me, and I seemed to be the only one to see them, my father was in complete denial (as he admitted years later) ... this is the psychic environment in which I saw the Auschwitz footage ...

... sometime shortly after I saw that footage, I was ill in bed and I heard a soundless scream that went to the depths of the earth ... it was coming from the closet, but the closet (I remember this vision so clearly) was a shaft into the center of the earth ... I can hear that scream yet ... I truly can ... and while I heard it, that day ill in bed, I watched, on a rocking chair, on its left armrest, a red rubber ball move slightly, as though moved by the scream, and it seemed it would take forever to fall ... looking back, I don't see how that rubber ball could have been there, but I can see it still ... perhaps it was a

dream, but I remember clearly being awake ... that soundless scream is the loudest thing I have ever heard ...

... not long afterward, when my mother went mad and was taken away, my father was driving, my grandmother was in the front seat, I was in the back seat, and Papa asked me where I thought my mother was, and I said, "She's in a concentration camp." I remember this vividly because he pulled the car over, stopped, and looked at me with an expression of terror, and insisted she was not in a concentration camp, she was in a "mental hospital" ... I didn't believe him, of course ... a few weeks later he and my mother's brother, my Uncle Aldo, took me to visit her, we four sat on a lawn, my mother looking so very tired and trying to smile at me, and a woman in a grey smock was dragged screaming across the lawn by men who really did wear white coats ...

... does it make sense to you that all this was my first experience of God? In those events was the certainty that *everything* in existence is an expression of God (though I certainly couldn't have said that then), and this terrifies me still, and fills me with awe and beauty too, for what it says about the nature of God ... that God requires Auschwitz and the scream as well as everything else ... That place, this perception, is the place I write novels from, and these days I haven't known how to face it ... haven't known what to bring to it ...

Nine days later ... I have been in more pain than I can remember, inner pain, paralyzed, unable to work, thinking seriously, *very* seriously, of not finishing the novel ... not until I sat down just now to finish this letter, and read what I'd written nine days ago, did I understand the source of this sudden collapse ... I wrote of those memories, and then suddenly I put my head down on the machine, so tired I couldn't move, and, literally, staggered to bed, passed out. ... In the morning I had no memory of what I'd written you ... didn't remember until I re-read the letter tonight, to finish it ...

... of *course* ... I invoked that seven-year-old, alone in the house and viewing Auschwitz (and I had no idea, at seven, that Auschwitz was in another land and in the past; it could have been going on around the corner, for all I knew); and the soundless great scream, to hear it again in memory at full strength ... I invoked that seven-year-old, brought him to life again inside me, and then just let him hang out, didn't tend him, care for him, just forgot him, and he couldn't bear that *again*, so he's been calling the shots all week ... no wonder ... my god, I've been in his pain all week and I haven't realized. ... I don't know what to say ... I, of all people, should know better than to just evoke something like that and try to breeze on ... *and*:

... realizing, just now: the Auschwitz memory coming to me after I told you my dream of Marilyn on the beach. So: They're intimately connected somehow. Hmmm. She was wearing a sequined dress, in that dream, but each sequin was a tiny screen showing all the scenes of the century, horrors and joys, and Auschwitz was among them. Hmmm. ... Got any thoughts on this? I could use them. ... Marilyn was becoming a star when I was seven. Somehow she's deeply associated with the memory of that house, that day. That time is when I must have become aware of her. And of course she was so very different from anything I'd known or seen (there weren't all those sexy billboards in the spring of '53) ... well this fucking novel is an *excavation*. Not only of my psyche, but of the place where horror and beauty meet ... for there is so much beauty in this world, so much beauty in our lives ... and I know how strong beauty really is, because the soullessness of this world has so much power, and beauty seemingly has so little, so how strong beauty must be to exist at all!

... these chaotic months ... this whirlwind ... you know the writer I feel closest to is James Baldwin, and there is an essay in which Baldwin says to God, "You won't speak to *me* from the safety of Your whirlwind." But he was ranting and he knew it, for God is the great thing that we have no choice about. And God *is* death. By which I mean: Without the fact of death always hovering, we would have no key for perceiving God. For we know God through the duet of beauty and death.

Neither, by itself, is quite enough for a sense of the fullness of God. It is the song both sing, together, that tells us the little that we know of God. Beauty, alone, would intoxicate us too much to care; death, alone, would drive us too far down to know. But beauty and death together force us to turn toward God. Their seeming contradiction *is* God, as far as we can know of God. And to stand for beauty in the face of death is the service God demands. It is the only worship that is not, ultimately, self-serving.

... as I'm writing this I'm listening to Charlie Parker, his incredibly fast solos, a cascading of impossibly fast music, note upon note, sound upon sound, the music of souls pressed too hard, and what they give back to the life that presses upon them is a torrent of sound, beauty moving at impossible speeds, as death moves at an impossible speed, beauty running its race with death. And the desperate joy of release you hear in the letting-go of these musicians, as they give themselves up to the tempo -- so we give ourselves up to what God is in our lives. ... and now, on this tape I made, Sinatra in '57 singing "Where Are You?", from that time when his heart broke on every note, and something in the breaking saved his art, you can hear him being saved by what is breaking. Love leads us through life by the very fact of its being untouchable, by the very way that, spirit-like, it appears and then goes far away, and how by this movement love leads us on where we might not have gone ... And art is an act of love.

Copyright © Michael Ventura. All rights reserved.