

## ***WHEN THE FURIES SING***

**By Michael Ventura**

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On December 17, 18, and 19, for the first time in my memory, *The New York Times* ran two- and three-tiered banner headlines three days in a row: impeachment proceedings and the bombing of Iraq. Perhaps my memory is faulty. Perhaps there were three such headlines in the days following John Kennedy's assassination. I haven't wanted to check, to skim the news of past disasters. "Sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof." Friends called and asked if I was watching the proceedings. "Not until somebody pays me to," I said. My 10th-graders came to class the morning of the 18th talking of the bombing. We spoke of it together. They were little children during the Gulf War, seven and eight years old, and their memories were child-like, vague. This was the first major American act of war that they could picture, question, attempt to understand. Suddenly, after about 20 minutes of discussion, I lost my voice. Choked up. My eyes teared.

For five weeks I'd been teaching a course called "History Through Poetry," a course that would end the next day. To teach poetry one must also teach silence. For silence is the habitation of poetry, is where a poem begins and ends. I'd taught them how to hear a silence -- or rather, that silence has a sound, many sounds, and it was possible to listen to it. I gave them a poem about what's in the silence, written by a 15th-century Japanese monk named Ikkyu: "You can hear it when it doesn't even move/you can hear it when the wind forces itself past rocks." I said, "No matter where you are -- in a subway, in a riot, at a rock concert, at a ball game, at a party, no matter where -- you can stop and hear the silence, or rather: hear a silence. Because the silence is always changing, but it's always there." They were attentive, as they almost always were, but baffled. I smiled, and so did they. One said something like, "Mr. Ventura, the things you say sometimes." I told them, "What I just said is the most important thing I'll ever say to you. If you remember it, and one day learn to do it, you'll know you've started to be free -- the kind of freedom no Constitution can ever give you."

Then, respecting their hunger for practical applications, I added: "Also -- comfort with silence can be a pretty good tactic. Most people are frightened of silences. If you're in a serious talk, or negotiation, or argument, especially if the stakes are high -- if you don't rush to fill the silences, if the silences don't unnerve you, if you can just let them be, the other person will sometimes stumble in to fill the gap with something he or she hadn't intended to say. At the least it can throw their timing off. Gives you an edge. Those old Zen monks were all for having an edge, if one was needed."

Well, they'd heard me say crazy things before, but we liked each other, me and that class, and gave each other the leeway to say crazy things. But after that, sometimes, when a question or the reading of a poem or just a lapse in the talk would produce a silence, I would hear one or the other of them whisper something like, "That was a good silence."

So now the teacher was all choked up, and there was a rich silence in the room, and the teacher had done part of his job, and the students had done theirs, for the silence in the room was accepted and listened to. Also, these students tended to be kind. So there was tension, but little embarrassment. When, after some moments, I had control of my voice again, I said something like:

"During the Korean War I was about the age you were for the Gulf War -- it was some vague, exciting thing going on far away. The first war I remember following and being concerned about was the Hungarian Revolution. Then the Cuban Revolution. Then the Cuban Missile Crisis. [We'd studied that. I had them interview their parents and grandparents, to see what memories ran in their families, and we read Dylan's 'A Hard Rain's a-Gonna Fall,' written during the Missile Crisis because he thought he might never get to write another song. We talked about the influence of that song upon future songs, intrigued with the strange, positive effects war sometimes has.] Then Vietnam. The Six-Day War. And all the civil wars and massacres and genocides since, and the Gulf War. You try not to feel it, you get inured to it, you find ways to say, 'Here we go again,' you try to think you've developed some kind of toughness toward it, you're a grown-up, you can face it and go on, you can uphold those values that are the only antidote to the poisons of war ... like Dylan writing his song even though he thought there might not be anyone left to hear it ... you think you've learned how to take it ... and then there comes a day when you stand before the young, who are just old enough to understand now and take it in, as they experience what is, for them, in a way, their first war, the first act of war by their country that they can comprehend ... doesn't matter if the cause is just or not, doesn't matter if it lasts a week or a year, it's a war, the first of many, many that the young will hear of by the time they're your age ... the first that these young can give real thought to ... you have to face the young and know that your generation hasn't stopped it, and that this is the world, or part of the world, you're handing on to them ... and ...." And I couldn't go on for a time, I choked up. "It hurts like hell."

Silence again. We looked at each other with seriousness and affection.

"And now," I said, smiling a little, "we'll shuffle papers and whisper and whatever, until the teacher gets his act together again."

The teacher got his act together. The period ended with reports from three of the students who had gone, with a student delegation, to City Hall the day before, to address the politicians (eloquently!) about not allowing some destructive "construction" in the neighborhood. The City Hall action had come completely from the students -- the impulse, the organization to do it, the speeches they made. The school was by no means in complete agreement with the action, and wouldn't give the students its imprimatur. So all the kids asked of the adults was permission to leave class (the hearings were during the day) and to be driven in school vans. Their City Hall presentation had gone well. When the reports were over, the students applauded their delegates. They were making a difference. Already. They were taking up the struggle. Responsibly. The class ended happily, with that applause. It was one of the sweeter moments of my life.

Much was left out of those banner headlines in *The New York Times*. News coverage has been transfixed with the hoopla in Washington and Iraq, but during the last two months, in short reports within the paper, there had been other, more serious data -- data we also discussed in class. Item: 20% of the adult population of the world is, at present, unemployed. Item: Roughly 17% of the world's population are now experiencing "chronic hunger." Item: Three out of four of the world's children are not in school at all, and are never likely to be. As one of my students observed, uncoached, when we discussed that last item: "They will be subject to misinformation. They won't have any way to know, or to find out, whether what their leaders are telling them is true. They'll be easily misled." All the end-of-the-year news hoopla -- all the lists of movies and music, all the predictions, even the impeachment proceedings -- pale before these items, items that will have more to do with our future than anything now happening in Washington, or

in the movies, or on the radio. Items that will be at least as influential as the computer revolution, or the advances in biotechnology, or anything else.

We educate our children, we say to them and to ourselves it's about college, it's about careers, it's about what-all, but we do not often admit to ourselves and we don't tell them the real reason -- the reason we educate them, the reason we make art and discover knowledge that we hope will be of use to them, the reason we try somehow to initiate them. It is because: They are needed. (As we were, and are -- though many of us have forgotten that as well.) They are needed. And, because they are needed, we give them all that we can so that they won't be mere pawns and flotsam when they must face the world that is and the world that's coming.

"Agreeing with me isn't the point of this class," I'd told them. "Having a thought and being able to express it and to back it up -- that's the point. I don't care whether you agree with me or not, if you can do that. You'll have to go beyond all of us anyway. But then, a lot of people in my generation have made that easier than it might have been."

"What would you say history is, Mr. Ventura?"

"History will bite you on the ass sooner or later and then you'll know, no matter what I say. I'm just trying to give you a little ammunition. Nothing by itself is enough, but poetry is actually pretty good as ammunition. Poetry, and a little knowledge."

And not to fear the silence. And to be able to get still enough to hear the silence that is always there and that can always make us stronger, even when the Furies sing.

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