

A STILLNESS OF LEAVES

By Michael Ventura

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There's a woman in Georgia who looks at you and knows things. All the words for what she does have been twisted shapeless by the tabloids and the New Agers, so let's not call her anything. Can't name her either – she wouldn't like that. But on the outskirts of Atlanta, following directions that either I always get wrong or are always given to me wrong, I manage to find her again. And again, as I sit saying almost nothing and she tells me almost everything, I'm stunned at what the psyche is, at how it walks around so naked that anyone with eyes can see it. As I'm leaving she tells me I should do a "sweat" if I get the chance. "Don't go in a white sweat lodge, go in a red sweat lodge."

"Give me a break, where am I gonna find an Indian who'll let me in his sweat lodge?" is what I think but don't say. She answers the question anyway, tells me if I'm open to it, someone will come to me.

Driving the thousand miles between Atlanta and Austin, I consider everything she said except the "red sweat lodge" stuff. I don't give that a second thought. Then, backstage at the *Austin Chronicle* Music Awards, I keep looking at a Native American man who's looking at me. A few minutes later I forget about him. An hour or so after that, a woman I've known nearly 20 years wants me to meet someone. It's this same man. He tells me he is leading a sweat in three days. I don't know how to describe his look. Does it make sense to say it is both gentle and intense, both deeply concerned (with me, personally) and completely detached? He reaches out his arms, puts two fingers on my heart and says: "You should come. The grandmothers and grandfathers have something to tell you."

I am so surprised that I completely lose the memory of his words until my friend reminds me of them the next day. And then I'm doubly shocked, even appalled, at having so blocked his words. The memory comes back, I feel his fingers on my heart again, and I know I'll have to go. And knowing that, I'm afraid. My friend laughs at my fear. (She's been laughing at my fears for years.) She reminds me that nothing can be revealed but what's already in the heart; that if it's a burden, I've been carrying it all along, so what is there to fear? Easy for her to say.

The man I sometimes refer to as my "Teacher" happens to be in town. Our friendship, too, goes back almost 20 years. The most extraordinary person I've known, his name is unknown to any except his friends. He's said, pointedly, that only a fool seeks fame. That people who become famous are doomed to repeat themselves for yet more fools, and every time they're forced to do this they know less. He says, "Language is not communication – language is a substitute for communication." Then he adds, "Thinking is make-believe."

"I'll have to think about that," I say.

We take a walk by the Colorado River, which divides North and South Austin. I never mention the sweat, or the woman in Georgia, I don't need to. It's not that he knows without my saying, though he sometimes does; it's just that he never interferes with a path already chosen. We'll compare notes at the other end, maybe. He's 20 or 30 years older than me (I've never been sure), and it is enough to talk together, gossip about our friends, sass each other, and know that the road is long. We'll walk together this way

even after one of us dies. We are both certain of this, without ever having spoken of it, and we're walking alongside that knowledge as much as we're walking alongside the river. At the end of our walk, for no special reason, my fear has dimmed to simple nervousness.

That night at a club called Pontie's, Jimmie Dale Gilmore sings a verse that will be on his new album: *So good to be home on the borderland/Where things are not what they seem/So good to be home on the borderland/between the dark and the dream.*

Three days later I'm standing with about 20 others around a fire as night comes on. Everyone has a towel. The men are in bathing suits or cut-offs or shorts; the women are mostly in long, loose dresses. The Pipe Carrier, as his tribe would call him, is blessing the fire. As with the woman in Georgia, as with my Teacher, so with this: nothing is public about it; there are no ads and only the subtlest of signs; you find your way here through following something in yourself that opens toward such things. So the Pipe Carrier blesses the fire and makes a gesture that includes all of us, saying, "This is not a game. We just come here to pray."

I feel strange telling you about this, and I didn't intend to write about it when I sat down at this typewriter, but the pact I've made with writing is: if it's demanding to be written, write it, no matter what. You start to say one thing, something else comes out. You follow where it goes, let *it* do the writing. Later, take the heat. Normally, I would wait years to write of such things, and then try to disguise them, not be so direct. If I'm offending anyone who participated in anything I'm telling, I ask their forgiveness. This is why I'm telling it:

Standing by the fire after the Pipe Carrier's blessing, I look up at the sky. Storm clouds are moving very fast on the wind. But down here, nothing at all, not a breeze. Even the smallest leaves are absolutely still. That's what the world feels like to me now. Gruesome things that we seem powerless to stop are happening all over the planet, and on every level of existence, like a monster storm, and yet there are places where the smallest leaves don't move, where blessings are possible. On the one hand, the country is going to hell; on the other, men and women everywhere gather in sacred ways.

In a small town near Augusta, Maine, a woman I haven't spoken with in many years tells me of gatherings of her and her friends, and they are just like the gatherings I know in Texas and California. The day after the sweat, 100 miles west on the Llano River, another friend shows me the shrine she tends, built with friends some years ago, and tells me of the days she spends beside the river alone, finding her way into her own rituals, which are so like mine, and those of other men and women I know. Clearly some communication is going on beneath language. Everywhere I go I run into people who are living like this.

The Western eye, which is expressed in a raw way by the media and in a more refined way by the university-trained intellectuals, doesn't know what to do with this, because to enter this realm is to leave the West. Where it leads, I can't say, and I don't know anyone who can. Many things are coming together – old stuff, new stuff. Something is forming in a quiet way beneath the chaos. Whether it will have an effect on our history probably depends upon our courage, in the long run.

And maybe it doesn't mean anything. Maybe we're just a bunch of hysterics. *Quiet* hysterics. Pathetic ghost dancers who think that if we dance till we drop the buffalo will come back. People so terrified of the new corporate order that we'll believe any slop that offers refuge. How did my Teacher put it? "We're so desperate we come awfully close to making fantasies work."

But standing by the fire, about to enter the sweat lodge, I don't think that.

This, then, is written in spirit from the clearing where the leaves don't move. Only to say that the storm is not all there is.

What goes on in the sweat is not for writing about, beyond what the Pipe-Carrier said, that we've come here to pray. In the tradition of the Judeo-Christians, prayer mostly amounts to begging: "Please, God, give me this or that." In tribal tradition, prayer is the human power of blessing – something you never hear of in Western thought. And to bless with all your heart clears a space inside you where there, too, the leaves don't move.

The next day, looking at the world again, a Butch Hancock verse keeps singing itself in my head: *I asked my angel/if heaven is near/She said, "It's closer than it looks/But you can't get there from here"/Where can you go when you're already gone?*

Days later, on the banks of the Llano with the one I'll call the Shrine tender, we talk about where you go when you're already gone. Crazy or not, right or wrong, pathetic or brave or both, somewhere along the road we stopped believing in what the West calls "The World." I don't mean in our heads (which, actually, are the last things to go – intellectually, I can still get suckered by the West); I mean in our knees, in our hair, in our cocks, our pussies, our tongues, our hearts. We still have to pay our bills in that devastated world, and that may get real tiresome, but *that's* what feels like the empty ritual. And to give oneself over to that emptiness seems like the only true mistake.

The Georgia woman and the Shrine Tender don't know each other, but they both spoke of the same deck of animal cards. The Shrine Tender had drawn the heron card, then sat on a rock by the river waiting for the image of a ritual to come to her. Instead, a heron came to her. Sat awhile, flew off. The day after she tells me this, 300 miles north in the Texas Panhandle, a heron glides across the road in front of me low and slow. I ease on the brakes and watch its passage. The last time I saw a heron hereabouts, or anywhere, was 17 years ago working with my Teacher on the Salt Fork of the Red River.

Call it what you like, I call it a sign. The storm is not all there is. The-world-that-calls-itself-"The World" is not all there is. I don't know enough tonight to give another clue. No one can go another's distance.

The next day my Teacher tells me, "When you start shedding some of the blocks, without fanfare, you meet with similar effort. 'Cause a man can't do this alone." A hard rain comes on as we speak. He laughs. "Hey! We're gonna talk it toward us, aren't we!" And later: "Others can only discover this as you've discovered it, by accident and effort."

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