AFTER MAILER:
SOME RECOLLECTIONS

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I FIRST MET NORMAN MAILER at a party in New York. It was the early 1960s, I was a writer in my early 20s, Mailer was somewhere close to 40. He brought me over to the couch and we sat talking for three hours until he finally stood up and said, "I'm certainly not going to marry you."

This did not alarm me; I hadn't even proposed. Mailer was simply my idol, whose books I'd started reading in my mid-teens and whose prose carried me along the river of style the way poems of Yeats did. I was too excited, often, to let the words lead back to sense or argument and instead read in a kind of heightened euphoria, feeling caught up into some sort of glory,

Being so caught up,
So mastered by the brute blood of the air,
Did she put on his knowledge with his power
Before the indifferent beak could let her drop?
—Yeats, "Leda and the Swan"

Mailer became my muse. Not the willowy, feminine type who adorns nineteenth century books of verse, or who wafts through pages of *Vogue* in Grecian folds; instead, my muse was a stocky barrel-chested macho male whose voice and example urged me on over the years, demanding I use myself up in writing, that I let it consume me until all the dross was burned away. I regarded writing as a vocation, a calling; it took the place in my life that faith must take in people who look outward for their gods. Mailer belonged to the ecstatic way, the Dionysian spirit, the male act of writing, the writer as his own subject and through him, the world (as in Whitman or

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Montaigne). Also, his protean ability to change styles, voice, theme, even vocabulary with each new book gave me the courage to attempt the same path. I did not want to grow into John Updike, channeling my world to what was familiar. Everything, Mailer showed me, could be my subject.

We were friends. Not close, but consistent. In more recent years I have been rewarded by the friendship of Mailer's wife, Norris, too. Their son, John Buffalo, once sat on my lap at dinner in their house facing the sea (the only brick house in Provincetown) and told me he was writing a novel. He went to get it, climbed back on, and read it to me, pointing to the illustrations he had made. He was about five at the time. His father was inordinately proud.

Though I am well aware of Mailer's reputation among women who take their sex very seriously, he never treated me with anything but the utmost kindness and courtesy. Indeed, Mailer's kindness to younger writers was as defining of him as his pugilist's stance, the fighter always ready to take on whatever devils stood in his way. Shortly after our first meeting, Mailer was guest of honor at one of the monthly meetings PEN held, in those days, at the Hotel Pierre with a full liquor bar. I was a member myself (my first novel was published when I was twenty-one), and went to the reception mainly to gawp at my idol. He invited me to have a drink with him afterward. I accepted, and when the PEN party was breaking up, we walked down Fifth Avenue together.

In those days Mailer was like the Pope and Brando combined. Or maybe Bill Clinton. He was immediately recognizable; people stopped and stared when we passed by. This had an instantly numbing effect on me, rendering me silent and flushed. Mailer must have sensed this; he began talking to me in French, shifting my attention from my own stage-struck embarrassment to grammar and verb-endings, not to mention genders. By the time we got to the cocktail lounge and took our seats at the bar, I was *parlez-vous*-ing with ease, and when he ordered the drinks we switched unnoticed to English.

Afterwards, he escorted me to Quo Vadis, where I was meeting my parents. When we entered, the waiters turned to mice, scurrying both toward and away from the Great Man simultaneously as my father stood up to greet us. Mailer stayed for a few minutes and then turned down my father's invitation to dinner, saying he had to get back to his family in Brooklyn. When he left, a loud whisper went up among the waiters, "*C'était Monsieur* Meylair!" My parents remained in a hubbub of excitement for the rest of the meal and over the years Mailer himself would refer to that meeting, even telling

Norris that my parents (he Viennese, she Czech) were cultured and charming people. He could tell, he insisted, and I believe he could—he had a knack for sizing people up, and for honoring their talents.

My admiration for Mailer was not looked on kindly by some of the women I knew. When he was president of PEN, Mailer nominated me for the board. I had started a prison program at the time of the Attica riot, offering a yearly literary competition with awards in different categories, as well as one-to-one correspondence between writers on the outside and writers on the inside. Mailer's nomination was meant to recognize this work.

I remember calling someone at PEN to ask if I should stay around for the elections, but was told they were *pro forma*—the slate was always voted in. I left on a trip to France soon after and when I returned, searched my mail. Nothing. I called PEN and was told I had not been voted in after all. Everyone on Mailer's slate, male and female, was defeated by a concerted effort of the feminists, or women's committee, of PEN. (A year later, under a new president, I was elected to the board. Grace Paley, among others, made it a point to apologize to me, saying they acknowledged the work I'd done for PEN but they'd had to vote against Mailer.)

But there were women, writers, who looked up to him the way I did. My friend Kiana Davenport, a best-selling novelist from Hawaii who met Mailer during the filming of *Maidstone*, talks of him in exalted terms, of his huge talent, the excitement of his prose, the energy he gives out, inspiring you, making you feel smarter than you ordinarily are.

She called me shortly after his death. "Oh honey," she said. We spoke gingerly, at the edge of tears. I'd been reading the obituaries online in newspapers here and in Europe. I told her the president of France had paid homage to our great novelist, and she told me how Mailer's death was being reported in Asian papers and on TV. "They're sobbing in China!" she said.

I received an e-mail of condolence from my friend David Spencer, a British playwright a generation younger than myself who lives in Berlin. When I'd first met David, at an artists' colony in former East Germany, he told me about his meeting with Mailer. It was after a talk, in Germany, and David went up to ask what he should do to gain the experience necessary to write about violence and danger. Should he go off to a foreign war?

That wasn't necessary, Mailer said. "Think of a frail old lady who has to cross a busy thoroughfare. She feels the same fear, she faces the same danger as the soldier in battle."

"I'll never forget that," David told me. "It changed everything."

Beyond his kindness to writers, his courtesy to strangers and his warmth as *paterfamilias*, there was of course his prodigious talent. Mailer taught us that the novel could be anything. He wrestled with it, made it take any shape he wanted. Just as *Moby-Dick* changed the novel irrevocably (a novel can have pages upon pages of encyclopedic whale lore?) so *The Executioner's Song* is a novel that combines fact and imagination, reporting and inhabiting, as well as the story itself (Gary Gilmore's execution) and the way this story played out through the media. Mailer was able to illuminate, demonstrate, provoke, distort, mimic, and faithfully reproduce all at the same time. He could be both in a book and outside it. He tore down barriers of form in the same way that he removed the constraints of social expectations or roles in his life as a man. Indeed, he seemed to live many lives simultaneously. He was our great American genius, with some ties to Falstaff, who was willing to do whatever he thought necessary to get to the truth—to be foolish, rude, unfunny at times, and to try things without fear of failure; a comic (as opposed to tragic) genius, whose constant optimism—that truth shall be known, that humans will understand, that life can be more fully expressed—led him to write a long trail of books, some failed attempts, and some works that will continue to amaze and inspire many of us for as long as books are read.

What I feel now, more than grief, is absence. I'd known he was ill, known he was in intensive care and didn't expect a miraculous resurrection—not even from him. But when he died, the morning of Saturday November 10th, I was not prepared for the effect it would have on me. Living in a world without Mailer in it is hard to do.