

INTIMATE DISTANCE:

# Remembering Ralph Angel (1951–2020)

By Richard Jackson (Faculty, W)

We stood there by the side of Lake Bled, Slovenia, 1992, opposite the castle that loomed above the cliffs, our common friends, Aleš Debeljak and Tomaž Šalamun introducing us, for Ralph and I had read each other's work, but had never met. In fact, the four of us were escaping a boring talk at a conference there, and exchanging our favorite writer stories, mostly exaggerated, a pastime we continued through the years in Vermont and wherever we bumped into one another. It was Ralph's look of bemusement, followed by a gutsy laugh, and his way of keeping the conversation going from what I would call an *intimate distance*, that so intrigued me, and, I believe, all who met him.

And it is that intimate distance that defines his poems. In an essay, "On Preparing for a Tribute Reading," he describes what he calls "the story of what isn't the story." For me, that explains lines like "what's most painful / is most hidden, even from me," lines that reveal so much. He wrote that his drama teacher once told him, "To act drunk, act like a man trying not to be drunk." It's a principle that increasingly drove his poems and reminded me, I told him once, of Miles Davis' "Don't play what's there, play what's not there." What's not there. Now I am haunted by the lines from "Privilege of Silence"; "The dead don't leave; some part of us / is missing." Intimate distance, absent presence.

I can still hear that presence in his voice, in the way he read aloud: a slow, quiet inevitability that, when a poem was finished, left a space, a kind of pause that invited you to enter, unlock the doors, listen to silences, take what you needed. I can't help but think that voice also derived from his love of Lorca, whose poems he described as having "a unique fluidity—full of discrete interruptions, accents, and silences." For Ralph, that voice was how you "make" a poem, not write it, for it was always an act of creation.

And that was a principle he kept emphasizing when he visited Chattanooga for our writer's conference, and which so opened the door for students, and opened it in such a way as to let their own styles, their own accents flower, let his own ego as a teacher slip back into those silences. He'd sit there on my couch, students on the floor around him entering those doors. Every time we were together he'd ask about those students.



We had begun back a few decades ago talking about other writers across from an ancient castle, and one of the last things we did together, along with Bret Lott, was record a poem each, of and for the memorial of another common friend, Jim Tate, in the Crowley Lounge at VCFA, at the 2019 summer residency. We lamented too, our many lost friends, including Aleš and Tomaž who brought us together, and remarked, so sadly ironic as I think of it now, how so many of those friends had passed.

As I write this I am also looking at Ralph's chapbook from last fall (*Strays*, Foundlings Press), and an "Untitled" poem that starts off with all the bustle of everyday life, then moves to ashes, tears, "whispering aspens," and ends: "an angel comes and taps / my lips." An angel. How fitting. How consoling to think so. The invisible, the silence. The absent presence. Playing what's not there, speaking the silences of its lines. The story that isn't the story. And I can almost hear him now, hearing him through that intimate distance that finds us all. What would he say? I hear him now through his own lines from "A Wind Will Carry Us,"—"If someone asks, say I'm / looking for buried treasure."

*Ralph Angel was a long-time faculty member of the MFA in Writing, serving the program from 1998 to 2020.*