

IF WE MAKE IT THROUGH DECEMBER

By Michael Ventura

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The thing about Christmas is that you know what's going to happen to the kid. No matter how sweet the crèche beneath the tree, that cutie in the cradle is in for a very hard time. He'll say and do amazing things, and become the central icon of a civilization, but you know his earthly reward will be failure, betrayal, torture, and an especially ugly end. There's no prettying up a crucifixion. Flies and birds are at you for hours before you die. Subjectively, if you will, from the point of view of the crucified it's a long time until Easter.

After I was old enough to connect the kid in the crib with the guy on the cross, Christmas was never the same. Somewhere around 12 years old I got to thinking, "Look what we're asking him to do for us. I don't want any part of it. I'm not asking that of you, little baby."

As I grew, I loved Catholic churches, Hasidic tales, Protestant spirituals, and Sufi poems, but came reluctantly to this conclusion: The violent, brilliant psychoses of monotheism generate extraordinary beauty and immeasurable suffering, and constitute a spectacle too stunning and awful to be judged by any except the God that monotheists imagine.

But that's got nothing to do with Christmas.

Christmas in America is especially problematic. It's tedious and obvious to mention that the Sermon on the Mount is as un-American as you can get. Blessed are the poor? Turn the other cheek? Not American values. We celebrate Jesus as an infant in a crib, where he's helpless, and as a man nailed to a cross, where he's also helpless. Beliefs that adhere to these images vary, but the images speak pretty well for themselves: The Sermon on the Mount makes you helpless.

And that, too, has nothing to do with Christmas.

For me, Christmas is only Christmas because people I love think it's important. I try to honor that as best as I can, but it makes you feel freakish when something precious to your people is valueless in your heart. Where they see something wonderful, I see rituals of reassurance that fail to reassure – anxiety boiling beneath the cheery hoopla. The Christmas song that says it for me is Merle Haggard's "If We Make It Through December."

Still, who can fail to be moved by Christmas art?

At age 13, right around when my heart abandoned Christmas (for that's what it felt like), I listened for the first time to a recording of Dylan Thomas reading "A Child's Christmas in Wales." A perfect story – the Christmas everyone wants. The poet is so convincing that you may listen many times and never notice that the figure utterly absent from his perfect Christmas is Jesus.

Thomas's last sentence is more Druid than Christian, yet nevertheless it gave me, then and now, a model for a Christmas prayer: "I said some words to the close and holy darkness, and then I slept."

While still in my teens, I discovered a Catholic poet who brought Christmas to life with a glory I loved and a terror I recognized: Robert Lowell. His 1946 *Lord Weary's Castle* is a kind of 20th century Christmas hymnal.

“Christmas Eve Under Hooker’s Statue” takes you to Boston Common during a wartime blackout. Lowell stands you beside the Union general, a fuckup if ever there was one: “The blundering butcher ... rides on Time -- / ... I am cold: / I ask for bread, my father gives me mould.”

Is this father the Father? Is he a heritage? In any case, he behaved like my father.

The poem ends: “But we are old, our fields are running wild:/ Till Christ again turn wanderer and child.”

With those words I could address the Christ in whom I could not believe. Couldn’t believe, but could address – a pain-in-the-ass existential position. Still, Lowell had the tone of Christmas as I felt and feel it.

“The Holy Innocents” frightened me: “King Herod shrieking vengeance at the curled/ Up knees of Jesus choking in the air .../ Still / The world out-Herods Herod; and the year,/ The nineteen-hundred forty-fifth of grace,/ Lumbers with losses...”

That made it personal: 1945, my birth year, the year the world learned of Nazi death camps and Hiroshima – the year Lowell looked into the manger and said, “Lamb of the shepherds, Child, how still you lie.”

“New Year’s Day”: “In the snow/ The kitten heaved its hindlegs, as if fouled,/ And died. We bent it in a Christmas box.” Then Lowell weaves into a final verse that gives us the infant Jesus’s circumcision. The last lines ring Biblically: “Time and the grindstone and the knife of God./ The Child is born in blood, O child of blood.”

That suits alike the 20th and 21st centuries. If we make it through December, indeed.

Everywhere I looked for a merry Christmas, I found contradictions too disturbing to ignore and paradoxes too entrenched to resolve. Finally, I gave up on everything Christmas except the part about gifts. Cheerfully rejecting all invitations, for years my preferred Christmas went like this:

Alone, I stocked up on Haagen Das ice cream, Black Bush whiskey, and good dark beer. Plus cigarettes. Over morning tea, I read the Sermon on the Mount. Aloud. Then I switched on *Lonesome Dove*, relishing its first lines:

Robert Duvall: “A little early for you two to be quittin’, ain’t it, girls? Or is it Christmas?”

He hands Tommy Lee Jones a whiskey jug.

“Girls yourself,” says Jones, hoisting the jug and swigging. “Ain’t Christmas neither.”

Good ice cream, fine whiskey, and the *Lonesome Dove* saga: For years, this was my ritual, living alone at 1236 Flores Ave. in West Hollywood, the building Steve Erickson immortalized in his books as the Hamblin. (In Steve’s *Leap Year* and *Amnesiascope* I appear as a clownish fellow named “Ventura”; the portrait is so hilariously accurate that I’m having excerpts read at my funeral.)

The Hamblin is only four stories high, but it situates on a steep Hollywood hillside that gives a vast view. From its rooftop you see about ten miles east to downtown L.A., another ten miles south, and another ten west to the sea. All those lights! Millions of souls! Turn 360 degrees and you see a dozen or so aircraft at varying altitudes blinking in flight – helicopters, small planes, and a tiered line of 737s and 747s making for LAX.

That's where I'd end up toward midnight on Christmas, on that rooftop – happy, tearful, inebriated, drunk with whiskey and solitude and goddamn Christmas, terribly glad to be alive – glad and grateful – and wanting to give thanks. So: prayerful.

Which is a dilemma if you're not a monotheist, because monotheists have thoroughly colonized religious impulses with their vocabulary, such that, when I pray, I often employ their usages, though what I mean by "God" is not what they mean.

I mention this because, on that rooftop, on the night when an entire civilization would be holy if it could, as I would if I could ... enthralled by the wonderful and terrible spectacle that is Los Angeles and that is us, you and me, humanity ... it occurred to me that Charles Dickens had it right in *A Christmas Carol*: Christmas is a time of potent ghosts.

Ah, Dickens: sentimental to the brink of farce and absurd to the core – but, for precisely those reasons, he always rings true.

So, no matter where I am now, midnight on Christmas I'm again on that rooftop, shouting out the benediction of fictional Tiny Tim, because, drunk or sober, you cannot better that imaginary soul's celebration:

"God bless us, every one!"

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