

SORRY, I CAN'T MAKE LISTS THIS YEAR

By Michael Ventura

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As I write, 1999 has about 44 hours to go -- 1999, the year of Kosovo and Columbine -- the year when many Americans said, at one and the same time, that they were basking in The Boom and that their schools should have metal detectors and armed guards, while seeming both innocent and ignorant of the moral weightlessness of this contradiction -- the year when, as *The New York Times* reported, one in four of the world's children live under the threat of war and/or violent social upheaval -- one in four, God forgive us -- in this, the Boom year, in which (again from *The NY Times*) 90% of the stocks are purchased by the most affluent 10% of the population -- a year in which every other TV commercial hypes the Internet, a massive propaganda campaign to make every household depend upon one line coming into the home, a line that can be switched off at a whim from afar (a fact no one seems to be noticing) -- a year in which few think it odd that, nearly every day, massacres are reported somewhere (how many remember that this is a recent phenomenon? how many remember that massacres used to be something less than a daily occurrence?) -- a year in which slavery, on a mass scale, is practiced openly in the Sudan and covertly in many other places without any hue and cry from the "civilized" nations -- a year in which the World Trade Organization is unwilling even to appoint a committee to discuss the issue of child labor, for fear it will disrupt trade -- a year in which the tenderness and love in my life, in my marriage and my friendships, seem like a prayer whispered within a scream, a worldwide scream so all-enveloping that most take it as common background noise, like the constant noise of traffic in a city, and go about their days as though they can't hear it -- they pretend not to hear it, but they want metal detectors and armed guards in their schools, so of course they hear it very well. -- I can't make any year-end lists because I saw maybe four movies this year, maybe three. Not because I don't like movies anymore but because I seem to have gone media-blind the way mountain climbers sometimes go snow-blind: The constant glare of sunlight on the snow numbs their retinas and, temporarily, they cannot see anything. So the constant glare of media has blinded me to it, so that all the ads seem to be hyping the same unending movie.

For perhaps the first year since I was 10 I bought no new recordings. Not because I think no good music is being played -- I'm sure there's good music, as I'm sure there are good films; and not from any conscious decision to shut out the world; but because I yearn more and more for a fruitful silence, for I've come to think of silence as the one truly connective element through which I can be in the present, the future, and the past, all at once: The one thing common to all three is silence -- everything else has changed and will change. It is difficult to make a list of preferences about silence.

I have always read poetry, but now I find myself reading more of it -- perhaps because there's so much silence at the beginning and end of every poem. For instance, these small poems by the late David Ignatow, written when an old man, not long before his death: *I'm closing the door,/I don't expect to find happiness/behind it, communicating with myself./The idea is to be able to say/I'm going to close the door/and then close it.* And this, so small, plain, and magnificent: *I have a name/a substitute/for the word/infinity./When my name is called/it is not me/you are calling.*

I read the poems of Anna Akhmatova (in translation). She was born in Russia in 1889 and died in 1966 -- the first woman in Western literature to be hailed as a great poet by her contemporaries as soon as she published, and to be seen that way all her life. It wasn't a safe occupation. Stalin was afraid of her popularity and didn't allow her to publish for decades. Instead of arresting her he arrested her son, who rotted in prison for years only because his mother wrote poetry. She bore all this, not to mention the constant danger and purges and violence all around her, with a dignity and integrity that are a constant tonic to me. Two years before she died she wrote this verse, translated by the late Jane Kenyon: *And the sun goes down in waves of ether/in such a way that I can't tell/if the day is ending, or the world,/or if the secret of secrets is within me again.*

Those words accompany me through many sunsets these days. As do these lines by my friend Robert Bly: *And the life of faithfulness goes by like a river,/ but no one sees it.*

Why is it a travesty to make a list of Ten Best Poems but not of Ten Best Movies? I don't know, but it is.

Or Ten Best Paintings? Thirty years ago at the Museum of Modern Art, their three huge canvases of Monet's *Water Lilies* were in one room, a chapel-like room that wasn't easy to find -- you walked down a hall off the main galleries and chanced upon it. There were two benches in the room and you could sit there for hours. It is not often that gentleness and immensity combine, in art or anywhere else, but in that room, with Monet's soft yet intensely passionate colors, in the midst of that great merciless city, you felt as though you were sitting in a chamber of your own soul. Now they've hung those paintings in a huge gallery, a hallway through which dozens of people are always passing, and the people who did this must have hated those paintings and all paintings, for paintings require stillness. But in memory I sometimes go back to that room and rest my soul there.

One 1999 image from the all-enveloping media onslaught does remain with me: a visual refrain of *Xena: Warrior Princess* all last winter and spring was a flash-forward of Xena and her companion Gabrielle being nailed Christ-like to crosses by Roman soldiers while thick huge snowflakes gently fell upon them. The first time I saw it, flicking channels, I thought I was having a hallucination. I'd had a fondness for the show, but this made me a devotee, for here was an image so unlike anything else on television, a strange and psycho-active picture of two young women, clearly in love, being crucified both in the ancient and the present world, and in a world of the imagination larger than cyberspace -- an image that had something to do with a year of daily massacres, and yet made poetry of it. Not whimsical poetry, but a poetry of snow and blood and love: The faces of the actresses, Lucy Lawless and Renee O'Connor, were transcendent with grief and bafflement and love, the very feelings that have transfixed me looking upon this horrible and miraculous century as it ends. (In tribute I bought a *Xena* calendar for the year 2000.)

I think of Coleman Hawkins' tenor sax playing Ellington's "Solitude" while the Duke adds mysteries on the piano and the violin of Ray Nance in the background is like a dream Hawkins is dreaming. I think of Billie Holiday singing *Hush now, don't explain -- you're my joy and pain*. I think of Sinatra's defiant romanticism, Dylan, Elvis, Hank Williams, Aretha -- and the songs of my friends Butch, JoCarol, Joe, Jimmy Dale, the Texana Dames -- Isak Dinesen's daring -- Fitzgerald defining love as "a wild submergence of soul" -- Baldwin reminding us, "One can only face in others what one can face in oneself," and the inescapable conclusion that the future depends upon what

we can face in ourselves -- I think of the 20th century, and I find myself saddened and relieved and afraid that it's finally done, with both a bang and a whimper, for I am its son, I had a place in it, and, like many of my kind, I am not so sure that I have a place in 2000.com.

So I don't make lists this year not because I'm above lists -- I've made many in my time, and I no doubt will again -- but because I'm overwhelmed, and I'm overwhelmed with, specifically, one juxtaposition that I can't get out of my head:

Auschwitz -- and -- Fred Astaire & Ginger Rogers --

That is my list, and that, to me, is the century, the spectrum of the century -- its unspeakable horror and its inimitable grace. That is what we did. That is who we were and are. That is what we give to the future and that is what the future must live with, and live up to, and bear: the unbearable and atrocious and even ridiculous contradiction of Auschwitz and Fred & Ginger. How could the same moment in history, the same humanity, create them both? Humanity's possibilities were still in doubt a hundred years ago. But in the 20th century we proved that humans beings are capable of anything. Capable of Auschwitz, of the grace of Fred & Ginger, of going to the Moon. We of the 20th century give that to you of the 21st. We've shown you what you're capable of. And now what will you choose?

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