

The Artist's Almanac

April 2007

The Present is the point at which time touches eternity
C. S. Lewis

Spring lasted about a week this year.

We expect short springs and long falls, but this spring was front-loaded. Winter gave us no real snow, and by mid March we were having 70-80 degrees, using air conditioners, and hoping for rain. Cattle were looking for shade under partially leafed trees. Daffodils and dogwoods, tulips and wisteria, which we expect in sequence, all bloomed at once, then quickly wilted in the heat. The trees shed storms of pollen, which covered cars and carpets.



Artists often err in ignoring their foreground in favor of distant clouds and mountains. Yet it is here, in the midst of close and familiar things, not on the faraway hills, where we live, breathe, and have our being. Living in our imagined future or a savored past, we fail to enjoy today.

Returning from my walk I heard a mockingbird. Rather, I listened to him. On a beautiful spring morning he was perched on the highest limb of the highest tree, giving a concert for his female admirers, for his rivals, and for me. His tail was cocked at a jaunty angle, flitting like a weather vane as he hopped from perch to perch and surveyed his territory on all sides.



He deserves a better name, for while he can imitate the call of every bird, from quail to jay, he is no mere copycat. I stood a quarter hour listening for a repeated theme, and heard not one. Were he a composer, he would be Mozart, Cole Porter, Stephen Foster, Verdi, and all we know, rolled into one. Audubon says of him, *the mellowness of the song, the varied modulations and gradations, the extent of its compass, the great brilliancy of execution, are unrivalled. There is probably no bird in the world that possesses all the musical qualifications of this king of song.*

The cats listen too, though they pretend not to. The mockingbird mocks their meow and even growls at them. If they dare the open lawn during nesting season he will dive bomb them, claws extended. He is of the shrike family with sharp pointed bill made for spearing his prey. Some cats run from him; others wait their opportunity. He is a daring fighter, but an occasional white-tipped gray feather on the driveway says he went too far.



The mockingbird adopts a family and a house. The one that regularly nests in the rose that covers our bedroom window awakens me in the middle of moonlit summer nights to practice his repertory. They make fine pets if taken as fledglings, but never sing so well as in the wild. Yet he is fiercely independent and you will not see him at your bird feeder.

April is a time of beauty and courtship, for all creatures great and small. When next you go out your door to a torrent of birdsong and discover it coming from one tree, look closely - you may see there a gray fellow whom the famous ornithologist and artist, John James Audubon, regarded as the world's finest songbird. Right in your back yard.

The English poets praise their nightingales. I have never heard one, but I'll bet a round of Guinness it doesn't have near the tunes of our state's favorite bird. Our Music City composer is a true Tennessean – versatile, daring, plucky, and ready to fight to defend his honor and his family. Like Andy Jackson, Sam Houston and Nathan Bedford Forrest, he is an original.