

The Artist's Almanac

December 2004

*What freezings have I felt, what dark days seen!
What old December's bareness everywhere!*
-Shakespeare

Children fear the dark, and truth be told, so do we.

This is the season of cold darkness and rain as we wind our way home along the interstates, following taillights, to the light and warmth of home and hearth.

Nights are longest now, yet problems which seem insurmountable at 2AM yield to even the weakest sun at dawn.

Either the sun returns or it does not. Our ancient ancestors, who had no illusions about their dependence upon the sun, weren't so sure it would, as it had been slowly disappearing for several moons now and even the days were short and dark. They knew their survival depended upon the sun that drew the corn from the earth to sustain them through the dark months.

Their wise men told them the sun would return, and set up circles of stone with slots to mark the very spot it would illuminate at its turning back to us. Far above a canyon in Arizona there is a cliff dwelling with a tiny peephole in its south-facing stone wall where the sun enters and illuminates an image of itself on the far wall only at winter solstice.

Our ancestors offered prayers for the return of light. Electricity, which now lights our world and powers our television and computers, makes us feel omnipotent, until a power failure. Then we pray that the Arabs will not shut off our oil again.

Coal, oil and gas are recycled sunlight, but once used up, they are gone. Our wise men strive to recycle the year's corn crop into ethanol or store the sun with solar panels. So far better recycling has been achieved with wine and good bourbon.

Not to miss out on the action, psychologists have discovered a new syndrome - Sunlight Deprivation Sadness – which marketers offer to alleviate with illuminated panels mimicking the sun's action. Depressed by the dark, we may flick a switch and stare unblinking into the light until we are restored.

The gardener finds her own answer in the catalogues and seed trays, which she nourishes with faith and hope in a sunny southern window. Her husband gleans the turnip green patch for surviving tender green leaves when the ground is dry enough to tread.

Dry days are few this month. Diaries from vineyard years show the last two weeks of December are invariably the wettest here. Rain does not just fall on the earth this month – it melts it and carries it away. The cold dank of this season allows no drying time, but the shrubs and trees need the rain.

The artist recycles sunlight. Reflected light is all he has to depict, and if well done, the subject may be anything - a recollected summer landscape, a rainy twilight, a bowl of fruit or a familiar human face.

Just as the ancient Sinaguan cliff dweller watched his solar signal slot, merchants and Wall Street investors study sales at this season for the annual refreshment of earnings. A season otherwise cold and drear becomes for them, as for expectant children, one of hope and cheer.

When we tire of watching the flickering ads in prime time or find nothing in the internet news to cheer us, we, like our ancestors, search the dark and weather-beaten landscape for hopeful signs. Like our expectant children, we long for the light of dawn.

Then, at midnight, on the darkest night of the year, it comes, and we are enlightened. The Son has returned, and we sing our carols of peace, good will towards men.

*In him was life,
And that life was the light of men,
A light that shines in the darkness,
A light that darkness could not overpower.*

December becomes the season of joy and light. May each of you share a generous plenty of it this Christmas!