

The Artist's Almanac December 2005

I have often thought, it happens very well that Christmas should fall out in the middle of winter. - Joseph Addison,

The oak across the street fills my view this morning. Its russet leaves, which in their green youth swept the summer sky of sun and rain, now crown the monarch towering above the forest. Behind it the lowering skies squeeze the winter sunrise to a narrow rim of orange on the surface of the lake. Freezing rain is forecast.

Now begins winter in earnest, with dark risings, cold rain, heavy coats, traffic jams and the flu season. Dr. Johnson says it best:

The winter ... is generally celebrated as the proper season for domestic merriment and gaiety. We are seldom invited by the votaries of pleasure to look abroad for any other purpose than that we may shrink back with more satisfaction to our coverts, and when we have heard the howl of the tempest, and felt the gripe of the frost, congratulate each other with more gladness upon a close room, an easy chair, and a - smoking dinner."

It is nature's great paradox that only that only the darkness enables us to perceive the light. The sun dazzles us with a billion lumens of light, while the poor artist must struggle to represent the rising sun with inert yellow pigments a mere fraction of its brightness. The artist's only way to strengthen his lights is by intensifying his darks.

We see the lights of the stars best on the darkest nights, never by day. In 1979 a satellite orbiting the earth from hundreds of mile up sent back a remarkable picture of Poland - vast multitudes of people in the center of Warsaw with thousands upon thousands thronging every road into the city. Around it were stationed tanks and soldiers awaiting orders. At the very center of this mass there shone a single white dot - a man in a white cassock - John Paul II. He was returning to his homeland, darkened by years of oppression. The order to the armies to converge never came, and Communism fell.

December is a month for seeing things as they really are. The elegant tracing of the oak's structure is now revealed, and I resolved this morning to sketch it. The surliest of us realizes now, with Scrooge, how precious are love, warmth and light. This month, at Christmas, the world turns back towards the light.

