

The Artists Almanac

February 2004

February is mud month.

The town dweller, going from carpet to concrete to car, scarcely gives it a thought. But in the country it is the season's bane.

Just haying the horses or filling the bird feeder can yield a week's supply. It comes in several varieties and colors: as clods, slime, paste, red, black, brown and yellow. It hides in cleated shoes, later to sift as dust into the pile of carpets and to grit our polished floors. We sling it, slog through it, slip in it, fall in it, and regard it as little above a cuss word.

We despise it, yet we are made of it, live from it and eventually return to it. For it is the stuff of creation.

It is the worst of judgements on a piece of art. A muddy watercolor has lost the light of transparency, and a muddy complexion in a portrait is to be abhorred. Yet mud is the universal medium, and many of our best paints are but special muds. Taken singly they regain their mother colors but in combination they may sing. Smart painters know the best grays are made by mixing a mud pie from the leftover colors on yesterday's palette. Pure white never appears in nature except in the center of the sun, which is why experienced oil painters tone their white canvases gray or red earth before beginning.

A sunny day in February, if we can but pull ourselves from the Super Bowl or our computers, is the best of times for a walk. A four-miler is no sweat, and there is much to see. Jonquils make their first appearance, and we can look for trout lilies in Hidden Valley. Its delicious scent discovers wintersweet in the fencerows and the exotic helleborus appear in the wildflower beds, hanging their heads against the return of snows. Nights reveal the starry firmament, Jupiter courting close to the half moon. My astronomy club is abuzz with emails about the spectacular displays and the Mars landings. The great owls call their mates and the distant sirens start the coyote chorus.

Serious fishermen know this is the time for trophy catches and they churn the lake with their motors and lures. Friend Frank, baiting with a one pound jack at the TVA Steam Plant boils, hooked a rockfish that all but towed his boat 'til he slipped the hook. His trophy is safe in his imagination now, but will one day resurface in one of his shining watercolors.

Winter fights back, but we are almost two months past the solstice, and she knows she is beaten. Wasn't it Thoreau who said, "Spring comes in as a wastrel, scattering her flowers everywhere and promising more than Summer can possibly ever deliver"? Maybe so, but for the artist, the gardener, and the fisherman, things look promising in February.

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