

The Artist's Almanac

February 2005

Winter is beaten, and knows it.

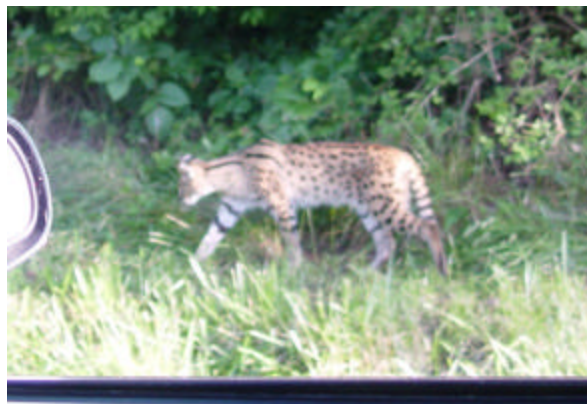
Now the five o'clock commute is by daylight. Early jonquils bloom and tulips are up; wintersweet perfumes the fencerows and grass greens up with every thaw

Grass, not a weather forecast, is what our local groundhog is about when he emerges from his dirt mound in our yard February 2nd. What he might have found fifty years ago was our cook's husband, James, waiting for him with a scoped rifle and a hot iron skillet.

We raised our own fruits and vegetables and killed our own meat. While I never enjoyed groundhog or possum, I savored all fruits in their seasons: damsons, blackberries, grapes, peaches, pears, and tart green Lodi cooking apples baked into pies. Summer brought to table new potatoes with peas, beans and squash, fresh roasting ears slathered with churned butter, watermelons and cantaloupes, fresh sorghum on hot biscuits, and strawberry shortcakes topped with whipped cream from the family cow. In the fall we killed hogs and feasted on backstrip with homemade sour kraut, putting back bacon, hams and souse for February.

Today we choose apples from Australia, grapes from Chile, Salmon from Alaska, fresh pineapple from Hawaii, and tomatoes or strawberries from Mexico. Our conveniences are made in China and our gas heat comes from Texas. The Kentucky coal which we once hauled to the grate in dirty scuttles is now converted into clean electricity to light our nights and our television sets, where we watch others frolic in the surf of exotic places. But we don't need to leave home to swim in indoor Olympic pools or work out on heated, padded tracks.

Today the rarest delicacies are local vine ripened Tennessee tomatoes, tart local cooking apples or red cherries for pies and fresh Portland strawberries. The exotic is become the commonplace; local produce the rarity.



Sighted strolling along our street this past June

Einstein tells us that time and space are just different dimensions of the same universe. I first heard the Babel of foreign tongues while serving in the army of the United Nations during the Korean War. Now I see these people and hear their languages on the streets of my hometown. Most of our restaurants are Mexican or Chinese and a knowledge of Spanish is necessary to direct gardeners or construction workers. It is no longer necessary to board a plane in order to find variety.

If people change, don't our surroundings as well? Once we were limited to rabbit, quail, and dove and the highest excitement was a midnight adventure by lanternlight for coon or foxes. Now the coyotes, whose chilling choruses rise to join every siren from an ambulance, have wiped out the quail and fox and we think twice before walking alone at night. Coons ravage our trashcans and eat our cats' food and squirrels deny us pears from our tree. Deer, once unknown, now pester us for handouts and are hazardous to drivers. Wild turkeys strut and admire their reflections in our living room windows. The animals know they are no longer hunted for food.

The big cat shown above is a Serval, imported from Africa by his owner, who was unable to keep him caged. This fellow has no scruples about hunting for rabbits and birds. Fortunately, he did not have a mate and he was soon trapped and returned to his cage.

Then, this week we found our national symbol, a bald eagle, had returned for his second visit to our place.



Our environment changes. Variety is not got only by travel, but by waiting as well, for the world to come to us.

“Change is the master key”, and we have it here, especially the weather. I feel sorry for Floridians who live in flat country with little seasonal change. Here we live in a no-mans land with some of the most extreme weather conditions of both the frozen north and the gulf south, with tornadoes to boot. Whatever the weather, it will change.

February is a month of change. On a clear sunny day this month you may see forever, your view unobstructed by leaves, clear into sunny spring. Then at night the north wind returns and we light the lamps and the fire and enjoy quiet reading.

Perhaps amidst all our changes, the weather itself is changing, though few of us live long enough to qualify as witnesses. Fifty-four years ago, on February 2, 1951, I went outside to read the mercury at 20 below zero. We had 12 inches of snow, which first began to thaw, then refroze, forming an ice crust thick enough to walk and skate upon. But for twenty-five winters now we have experienced neither substantial snow nor long periods of sub-zero temperature.

Perhaps the global warming warnings are right. I hope not. That would mean that Florida, too, had moved to Tennessee and that we had lost our February.