

The Artist's Almanac

January 2005

*No day's remembrance shall the good regret,
Nor wish one bitter moment to forget;
They stretch the limits of this narrow span,
And, by enjoying, live past life again.*

-F. Lewis

At last - the quiet month.

The cleaning, cooking, feasting, mailings, and parties past, the frenzy of shopping, wrapping and unwrapping ended, the house guests finally gone, it is, at last, a time for quiet. And long walks.

Summer is the worst time for walking. Ticks, chiggers and snakes infest the woods, and the verdant trees hide their trunks and block all seeing amongst them. Morbid humidity settles in, brambles block paths, and the merest stroll is a drenching effort.

In January the trees stand like ranks of heroes atop distant ridges, their purple trunks silhouetted against an orange sunset. Gulls wheel in white swirls above the lake shrieking their wild, dulcet cries of fish and of the sheer joy of flying on a bright winter's day. A three miler is no sweat.

We usually have a midwinter thaw in January, and then is when, good wife and I, we walk the place. We begin at the old log carriage barn where Andy Jackson probably stabled when he came upriver to visit the Wyllie Plantation and to breeze his mares on the track in the river bottom. We descend the rocky road to Hidden Valley. This old way is lined by cedars so ancient you may flatten your back against them and, looking up, feel the wind and imagine yourself in a redwood forest, where even the largest of trunks dances to nature's music.

We cross the spring branch, deep here near the river, on a log footbridge and strike the lakeshore, heavily wooded with old growth forest of oaks and maples. We follow the footpath as it ascends past the Indian graves and squamash patch to the hill field. Here, from the highest point, we can look upriver twenty miles on a clear day to see the White Elephant – the cooling tower of the abandoned Hartsville nuclear plant.

We cross the dividing ridge, taking to the thickets to avoid picking up the dogs at our son's house, where we can hear the grandchildren at play. We follow the rutted Buffalo trail to circle back to the river bluff, where we look once more into the rock reinforced machine gun nest where some of General Patton's soldiers defended itself others practicing their Rhine crossing here. The artillery piece it defended would shake our school in town sixty years ago, and we could hear the steamboat whistles as well, as they plied the river with cargo.

We trace the Corps boundary line along the bluff, replacing fallen markers, until we reach the wet weather spring above the cove and the stump of the old slave-built stone fence marking the back line. This we follow through the oak woods until we reach the

boundary oak at the corner, where we turn and cross the rocky branch, which descends to Station Camp Creek. We skirt the thorny Black Forest until we hit the farm road, which we follow back to the nursery field. There we look for arrowheads and stone awls as we cross the old Indian Village site. To the north the houses march out from town. We descend the farm road to house, home and a cup of tea.

At twilight before a blazing hearth we reflect on our life here and the life of the many others who inhabited or traversed this land, including

- the nameless prehistoric tribes, who left only their stone box graves and the shells of the river mussels they once roasted and consumed,
- the followers of Dragon Canoe, or Hanging Maw, who came seeking blood,
- the slaves with first names only who lived in the primitive cabins marked only by stone foundation stumps,
- George Wyllie and his family who lived in the large plantation house on the hill, who found himself surrounded by an encampment of East Tennessee Union Troops who ate his cattle, stole his horses and burned his fences for firewood, leaving him with only one old peafowl.
- The young Union soldier, dying here of dysentery, whom George Wyllie took into his own house and nursed, even as his own sons were away in the Confederate Army, and of his letters back home saying he could be cured by just one drink of cold spring water from his mountain homeplace.
- The boys from New York and Chicago who camped here in the summers of the 40s, startled by the night sounds of the katydids and bullbats. Many of these young men lost their lives at Normandy or in the Bulge.
- Los amigos who come from south of El Rio Grande and now till these fields.

We reflect as well on our lives here, of the coming of brides and grandchildren, of summer lawns with horseshoes and catching fireflies, of riding schools, anniversary dances, Halloween parties with scary walks through dark woods and fortune tellers, of harvest and bluegrass festivals, sightings of deer, turkey, and bald eagles, of gardens past, with fresh vegetables and flowers three quarters of the year, of quiet small dinner parties and good talk, of fishing below the bluff with granddad, of the sounds of children playing and laughing.

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Janus was an ancient Roman god of gates and doorways, depicted with two faces looking in opposite directions, whose festival month was January. We honor his month with resolutions for the future, some forsaken and all ultimately forgotten. Then future becomes past and, as we live out our lives, we all of us grow finally to have more of memories than we have of future here.

Dr. Johnson makes sense of all these wandering thoughts in his Rambler, number 41, On Memory.

...Almost all that we can be said to enjoy is past or future; the present is in perpetual motion, leaves us as soon as it arrives...and is only known to have existed by the effects which it leaves behind. The greatest part of our ideas arises, therefore, from the view before or behind us, and we are happy or miserable, according as we are affected by the survey of our life, or our prospect of future existence.

It is therefore, I believe, much more common for the solitary and thoughtful to amuse themselves with schemes of the future, than reviews of the past. For the future is pliant and ductile, and will be easily moulded by a strong fancy into any form. But the images which memory presents are of a stubborn and untractable nature, the objects of remembrance have already existed, and left their signature behind them impressed upon the mind, so as to defy all attempts of erasure, or of change.

As the satisfactions, therefore, arising from memory are less arbitrary, they are more solid, and are indeed, the only joys which we can call our own. Whatever we have once deposited...in the sacred treasure of the past is out of reach of accident, or violence, nor can be lost either by our own violence, nor can be lost either by our own weakness, or by another's malice.

*Be fair or foul or rain or shine,
The joys I have possess'd in spite of fate are mine,
Not heav'n itself upon the past has pow'r,
But what has been, and I have had my hour*
Dryden

...There is certainly no greater happiness than to look back on a life usefully and virtuously employed....Life, in which nothing has been done ...to distinguish one day from another, is to him that has passed it, as if it had never been, except that he is conscious how ill he has husbanded the great deposit of his Creator. Life, made memorable by crimes, and diversified thro' its several periods by wickedness, is indeed easily reviewed, but reviewed only with horror and remorse.

The great consideration which ought to influence us in the use of the present moment, is to arise from the present effect, which, as well or ill applied, it must have upon the time to come; for though its actual existence be inconceivably short, yet its effects are unlimited, and there is not the smallest period of time but may extend its consequences, either to our hurt or our advantage, through all eternity, and give us reason to remember it for ever, with anguish or exultation.

In youth, however unhappy, we solace ourselves with the hope of better fortune, and however vicious, appease our consciences with intentions of repentance; but the time comes at last, in which life has no more to promise, in which happiness can be drawn from recollection, and virtue will be all that we can recollect with pleasure.

Let us resolve then, this January, to make ourselves good memories.