

# The Artist's Almanac

## May 2006

*It is folly to assume that Fortune ever adequately insulates us from herself.*  
Montaigne

May's beauty has a scar on it this year, left by April.

The day began sultry, with listless breezes, first from one direction, then from another. By early afternoon predictions of heavy rain turned ominous, and, what looked like an angry fist protruded from the storm front pictured on television,

The sky was a yellow brown to the north of us, and I heard what some have described as the sound of a train. It was the awesome sound of the heavens inhaling the earth.

The lights went out at 2:28. Soon after we heard the sirens. The River Bridge filled with flashing lights as help poured in from nearby counties. The battery radio warned of another storm approaching Nashville from the west. Refugees began arriving, workers from the farm, family, and strangers.

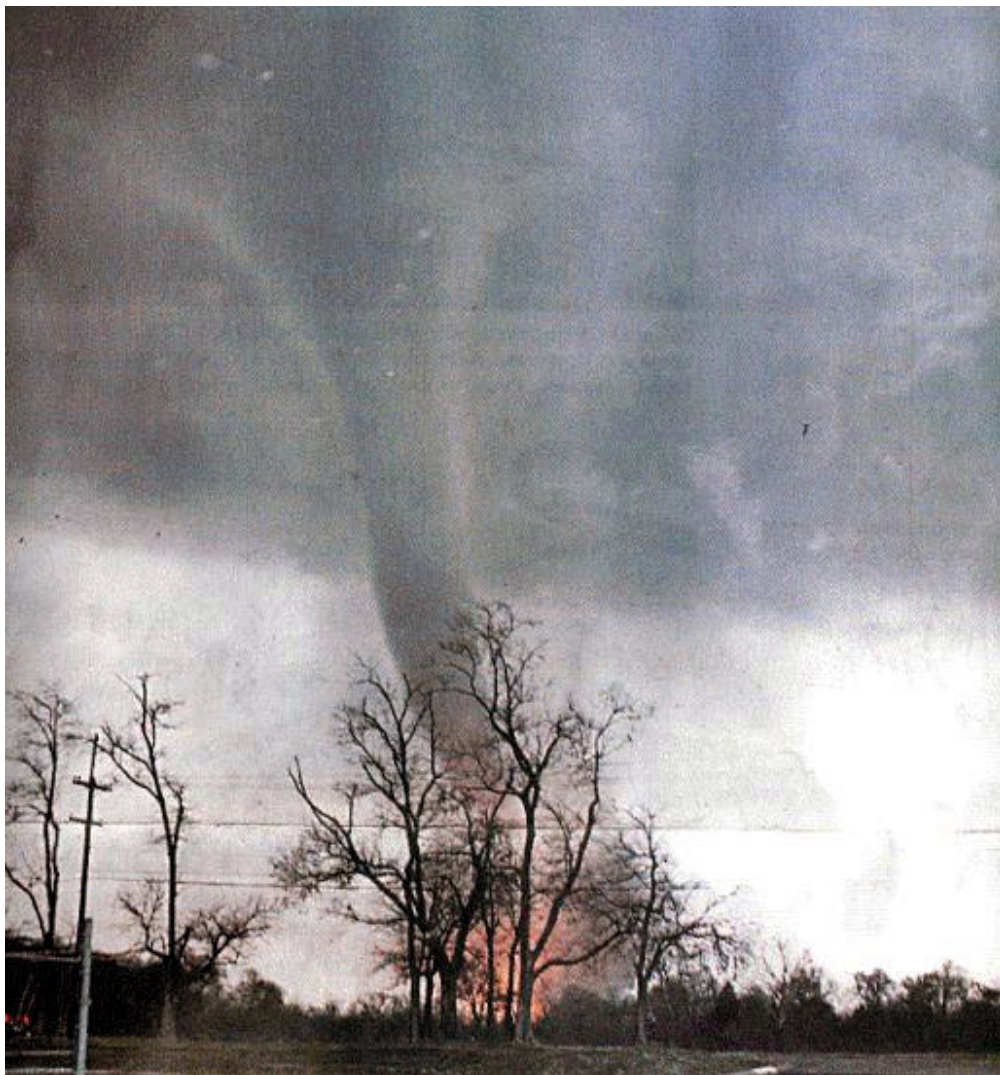


Photo by Brandon Puttbrese in *The Gallatin Newspaper*

An expectant mother with her young child had been trying to reach the shelter of her Mother-in-law's home with its basement, when she saw the tornado headed straight for her up Nichols Lane. She did a U-turn and sped ahead of it to Highway 109, where she turned south and encountered our farm manager, who led her to our house. We spent a candlelit evening with new friends, all trying to reach family via jammed circuits. It was nice, said one young girl, just to have someone to talk to.

Our two exit routes were blocked – Lock Four Road, by fallen trees and electrical wires, and Highway 109, where several were killed near a convenience market and a steel-framed electrical supply business, which was reduced to a small pile of rubble. The owner's son was killed as he pushed a passerby into the last available space in a packed inner room.

The world at large could see our neighborhood long before we could. Nationwide television gave Gallatin its fifteen minutes of fame, and calls and emails poured in from those stunned by pictures of destruction. With roads and power cut off, we could only hear of it via telephone from people seeing us from far away.

Out of the chaos we pick remnants and conclusions.

- It might have been much worse. We were warned - children were locked down in their schools, and people were at work, in brick and steel buildings. The funnel was visible and many in cars fled its path. The same tornado at 3AM would have killed hundreds more than the eleven lives tragically lost.
- Humanity did itself proud. People came from everywhere, immediately, volunteers in droves, to do what they could and learn skills they didn't know they had. When FEMA advised a two-day course to qualify volunteers, they simply went around and after bending a blade or two learnt not to saw a fallen tree from the underside. The Red Cross was in evidence everywhere and served more sandwiches and coffee than could be consumed.
- The firemen, police, highway departments, and workers for all utilities – electrical, telephone, gas, water – worked long and unselfishly to restore vital services. We should be grateful each morning for those who each day make possible light, heat, safety and hot water.
- Security was excellent. Each time I had to show my identification to a courteous policeman in order to get into my own or into a friend's neighborhood I was grateful that looting was so effectively thwarted.
- The electronic warning services – the Weather Service, TV, radio, all worked well to warn all who would hear as to where and when.

The fly-over focus on its path and the close-up shots may have left an undeserved impression of its generality. All who have returned from viewing the area of the Katrina hurricane have agreed – it is even worse than pictured. A battering by gale winds followed by flooding is a disaster affecting all in an area. This was more like a sharp knife, slicing a scar a hundred yards wide for ten miles, jumping areas in its path, grinding others to the ground. Here is a bare foundation where once a house stood while across the street a neighbor's home stands with not a shingle out of place. To say thanks that I was spared by God's mercy implies an unwelcome corollary - that the finger of God reached down and struck my neighbor. Surely not.

Still, there is terrifying symmetry about a twister. Our farm workers watched two of them, weirdly luminescent, in a sinuous dance, now lifting, now joining together, dropping to grind down the business and people at the intersection of 109 and the bypass. Nothing beautiful left down there. Lee Electric, with its twisted steel frame, shards of glass and fresh memories of violent death reminded me of nothing so much as it did the ruins of the building I saw at ground zero in Hiroshima.

On the Internet last month I saw an artist's paintings of homes destroyed by Katrina. This may be a form of reporting, but, to me, not art. Art is about beauty and is done out of love for the subject. A tornado is natural, but not beautiful.

Modern medicine and technology makes it possible for us to forget those faces of nature we'd rather ignore, which are not lovely – disease, pests, and decay. But we cannot ignore an earthquake, fire, flood or tornado. We can only cringe before its power and seek shelter.

An event of this magnitude restores our perspective. The proper response of the artist is not to reach for his brush and palette but for his work gloves and chainsaw.

