

The Evening Sun

Other Voices

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May Day, M'aider!

MAY DAY used to be an occasion for celebrating a joyous reunion with nature after the long, cold winter. All over Europe and the English colonies, people cast off their winter wool-

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lies, put on bright clothes, and took off for the burgeoning woods. Students sang hymns to the new greenery, led by their teachers.

Soberer people strolled under the budding boughs, switching themselves with birch branches to keep themselves "green." Lovers wove each other wreathes, and May wine and new beer were served outside.

Freud and the work ethic have put an end to all that. Any 14-year-old boy who followed ancient tradition and planted a young tree, with its leafy crown decorated with ribbons, outside his sweetheart's window would be likely to risk psychiatric treatment.

And the stroll in the woods is no longer available to most of us. Imagine all of Baltimore, out on holiday, industriously greening itself with birch whisks and downing a libation to spring in the public parks. Illegal, and certainly likely to cause a traffic jam.

Suppose we all lit fires on the heights at sunrise, to welcome the May Day sun? Swift arrest for illegal burning would surely follow. And those children who crept out of bed early, with hand-woven May baskets to gather flowers to hang on the doorways of those too old or too ill? Supposing they could find flowers in the inhospitable concrete world of the shopping centers, could they then beg and expect to get the May cakes to which they are entitled from the recipients of their baskets?

Robert Herrick had the right idea. "Come," he said. "Let us go while we are in our prime, and take the harmless folly of the time." Harmless folly was what May Day used to be about. Fishermen, after the long inactive winter, were advised by Walton, "First, for a May Flie, you may make his body with greenish coloured crewel . . ." Ponder all those stolid men, constructing their lures before the advent of plastic facsimilies; winding the wool on a cork form, and dreaming of the trout that would rise, rosy-speckled, to the bait.

Think of all those generations gone before, who made May-cakes (little sugar and almond cakes, for the sweetness of the morning) and dressed May-ladies, made out of the last straw from the old fields, garlanded in hawthorne — the May flower — and set out to help the new straw grow. Think of a time in which nothing was more important than getting up early to go out and sing love songs at the top of your lungs, in company with some jolly friends. Think about a whole city the size of London expecting everyone to do just that, business-as-usual be damned.

This May Day, pick a bit of green, and bring it home. Indulge in the curious practice of giving — or getting — a "green gown" — so called because when the May revellers came home, you could see they had been lolling on the ground and contemplating nature from the grass-stains on their clothes. Hang some flowers on the boss's door-knob. Take him out to listen to the birds. And feel yourself in communion with simpler days and wiser ways, when there was time to stop everything and say, "Welcome, spring."

Rosemary Knower is a Baltimore free lance.