

## THE SEASONS

Choral prelude: For the Beauty of the Earth – John Rutter

### Summer Fence

Fences now come in fat rolls of linked wire with hollow metal poles coating the land with an industrial appearance. Sometimes, as an urban home accent or around an old farm, you can find a rail fence zigzagging over lawn or field. Whether cut from cedar, chestnut or redwood, each fence has a history that stretches back to a place, a specific piece of earth. And in summer a rail fence is the highway for more forms of life than are most whole trees.

A rail fence, even in the city, is wild country that by August can bear a forest full of plants and creatures. Stout weeds wave majestically from its protective shadow while morning glory vines are thick enough to hide its essential form. Squirrels, weasels, mice and a host of mammals and insects pass along it. Many a Bob-white passes safely by squatting close to the bottom rail. Wrens thread its tangled maze searching for edibles. Sparrows mount the topmost stile and sing their presence. Even the tiny rectangular spaces where rails meet other rails are homes for mice and spiders.

Some rail fences were cut a century ago and bear their history in moss and fungus. They link us to times past and all the life that has drifted through those rails or stopped obediently at their boundary. Beneath all the accretions ancient cedar retains its fragrance. Chestnut is close-grained and so straight that it must come from a main trunk. Huge white oaks also drifted down in remnants to become the humble rails our forefathers leaned on to discuss the weather.

Scarcely a known weed that hasn't found a foothold here. Deer sail over the rails or nibble on the banquet growing up around them. In summer an old rail fence is the landscape in miniature, the ants' expressway, a sun platform for snakes and lizards. A relic of the past, a rail fence of uncertain age seems timeless as a rock.

Choral Summary: Summer is a-Comin' In

## Autumn: the Great Return

In Alaska the hemlock and spruce forests are timeless and ancient. Mountain ridges tumble down to the Pacific Ocean whose waters reach far up into the many creeks that drain this land. Wind blows curtains of fine rain until the whole forest is green and dripping. There is an unearthly stillness except for the sound of life rushing through the creeks. The salmon have returned.

After a year of growth in the great Pacific waters they return to the same waters in which they were spawned. Nearly a yard long, weighing ten to twenty pounds, glistening with the power of full maturity, they have come home to die. But not before they will spawn the next generation and set the delicate eggs on a dangerous journey that only a few will survive. Even now great shaggy bears aiming to stuff themselves with food before their long winter sleep wait beside every stream, ready to scoop salmon out of the water before their mission is accomplished.

For the ten percent or so which have survived the sea, this is the climax of their short lives. Despite their outward beauty, a close up view shows the damage they have endured. They are covered with brown fungus. Chunks of skin have been gouged off. Fish hooks hang from torn mouths. During spawning season both males and females turn red on their undersides and develop a snout. They wait in thick clusters for the incoming tides to lift them higher from one pool to another until they reach the pool of their own origin. Then males and females line up beside one another and together release their genetic material. The pool turns milky with the huge release, and smaller fish push in to devour the resulting eggs.

Pools turn into mad seas of churning bodies as salmon defend their eggs from thieves and bears dip in to snatch their meals. Within a few days the salmon will die, their bodies becoming part of the passing centuries in this ancient place. The eggs will float out with the tides, and the very few that survive will make this same desperate journey as another autumn makes its way across the hemisphere. This great migration is testimony to the unkindness of nature and the power of instinct, the will to survive that brings these creatures here time out of mind.

Choral Summary: Autumn Leaves, or September Song or  
Autumn by Andy Beck (Alfred Publishing)

## COLD

Many a conversation starts with “I remember the winter of '88 when it got down to minus” (whatever). Someone is sure to offer a lower degree elsewhere. It's a matter of civic pride. The Nation's Icebox is a cherished title, often in contention between Minnesota and Alaska, an icicle for a winner's symbol. On a day of 25 below zero one child informs another that if he steps out of the house naked, he'll be dead in three minutes – and when he thaws out, he'll be green. Cold inspires such flights of fancy.

In cold country people drift toward reading groups, choirs, card parties and memoir writing. Cold is the absence that works its way under shirts, doors, down chimneys, leaving fingers and toes like frozen twigs clinging to stiff branches. In its presence engines refuse to turn over while noses never stop running. Cold rates its own apparel from hats to snow boots with a whole padded array in between. The items are so bulky that rooms are set aside for them, each labeled with owner's name. The smell of wet wool, polyester oil and scuffed rubber hangs between the walls.

When heat pumps lose the struggle, the family fireplace is still the circle of hospitality. S'mores and popcorn are worth singed eyebrows, an occasional finger blister. The memorable aroma of cedar, the trail of chimney smoke against gray skies lodge in our minds from childhood. Splotches of bright color mark sledders and skiers leaving white breath clouds on hillsides. Cold sends us hurrying, hearts pumping, on our daily rounds. A trip to the mailbox is a venture requiring preparation. All around us the tracks of deer, rabbit, and fox reveal their search for food. Birds that brave the cold cluster at backyard feeders. Nature is implacable and cares little for our comfort. Only our wits defend us from the ancient enemy that rules the killing season.

Choral Summary: A Winter Carol – Austin Lovelace  
In the Arms of Winter – Ruth Schramm

## Puddles

When does Spring arrive? Some would say when the first crocus puts a leaf above the snow or the first daffodil blooms. For those who live in the Eastern United States there is a sign more certain than these.

After the spring rains have begun, walk out into any wooded area and look for a depression that has been in that place for many years. It will fill with water and drain very slowly as new rain falls and the sun gathers strength. Sit on a handy stump and listen. Out of the quiet you will hear the high cheeping of spring peepers, those half inch sized tree frogs who call that puddle home.

They have been during most of the year burrowed in the dried mud or in the woodland soil, the folds of trees, wherever shelter from heat and cold is available. When those brief puddles appear, the peepers rush to find mates, lay eggs, hatch tadpoles and grow new frogs that return to this same place. Nor are they alone in their use of puddles. A host of bugs, flying insects, beetles and worms depend on the seasonal appearance of temporary water safe from predators that haunt rivers and streams.

The puddlers are the foundation of the natural world. When mosquitoes rise on their gossamer wings, they are snatched up in banquet proportions by hungry birds returning from Mexico. The peepers lay thousands of eggs so that a few adults may evade the appetites of small forest creatures at the base of the food pyramid. These temporary pools that warm faster than lakes and rivers are vital to the existence of bird populations as well as a host of small mammals.

Life in these pools is chancy. Creatures that live there must synchronize their life cycles to that of available water, often having to migrate between pools as they dry up. They must be able to sustain life over the year between the appearance of puddles and find new puddles when humans change the land. When we fill in drainage ditches, level land for building, drain wetlands we damage the shallow floor of nature's food pyramid. We must learn to cherish puddles, the chirp of the tree frog, the coming of spring.

Choral Summary: I Believe in Springtime – John Rutter  
Spring has Come - Leininger