

Preface:

The Groundhog, in a Nutshell

Also known as *marmota monax*, woodchuck (Native American, "wojak"), and whistle-pig, this squirrel family member usually weighs in at less than 14 pounds, distributed along 17 to 20 inches, with 4 to 6 inches of tail. (The fellow is reportedly "edible," albeit by unspecified predators.) In summer, he binges on the grassy vegetation, clover and dandelions of pasture land (and gardens) in the Eastern and Central United States, Canada and Alaska, beefing up for his winter hibernation. He sleeps alone in a burrow of his own construction (with entry and exit), which is abandoned to rabbits and foxes when he goes mate-hunting in the spring. (Unless it's paved over for a shopping mall: "Groundhog buried alive. Twelve more years of winter--in Phoenix.")

*If Candlemas be fair and bright,
Winter has another flight.
If Candlemas brings clouds and rain,
Winter will not come again.*

Observed on February 2, Candlemas Day marks the 6-week midpoint between the winter solstice (December 21) and vernal equinox (March 21). Its pagan origins are German, its *Ur-Wetter-Voraussager*, the badger (*Dachs*). Pennsylvania settlers reassigned these predictive powers to the more docile (and thus more edible?) groundhog. The earliest documented sighting of his shadow by the American Ersatz-Dachs was 1841. Allowing for a few missed recordings since 1886 (No-show's: too many imported dachshunds about.), the groundhog tends to see his shadow roughly eighty percent of the time, usually around 7:20 a.m.

*If the sun shines on Groundhog Day,
then half the fuel and half the hay.*

So reads the Williams-pragmatic American version of the Old English aphorism. This year's prognosticator probably slept through Election 2000 (and would doubtless have miscalled it too), but when he emerges, what a shock:

*Four more years of loyal shrubs;
twice the price for oil and drugs.*

The Groundhog
Richard Eberhart (1936)

In June, amid the golden fields,
I saw a groundhog lying dead.
Dead lay he; my senses shook,
And mind outshot our naked frailty.
There lowly in the vigorous summer
His form began its senseless change,
And made my senses waver dim
Seeing nature ferocious in him.
Inspecting close his maggots' might
And seething cauldron of his being,
Half with loathing, half with a strange love,
I poked him with an angry stick.
The fever rose, became a flame
And Vigor circumscribed the skies,
Immense energy in the sun,
And through my frame a sunless trembling.
My stick had done nor good nor harm.
Then stood I silent in the day
Watching the object, as before;
And kept my reverence for knowledge
Trying for control, to be still,
To quell the passion of the blood;
Until I had bent down on my knees
Praying for joy in the sight of decay.
And so I left: and I returned
In Autumn strict of eye, to see
The sap gone out of the groundhog,
But the bony sodden hulk remained.
But the year had lost its meaning,
And in intellectual chains
I lost both love and loathing,
Mured up in the wall of wisdom.
Another summer took the fields again
Massive and burning, full of life,
But when I chanced upon the spot
There was only a little hair left,
And bones bleaching in the sunlight
Beautiful as architecture;
I watched them like a geometer,
And cut a walking stick from a birch.
It has been three years, now.
There is no sign of the groundhog.
I stood there in the whirling summer,
My hand capped a withered heart,
And thought of China and Greece,
Of Alexander in his tent;
Of Montaigne in his tower,
Of Saint Theresa in her wild lament.