My Own Personal French Republican Calendar
Adrift in timelessness during the pandemic, writer Lisan Jutras found solace and connection with nature through an obscure 18th-century calendar.

S
omentime in November of 2020, I began following a niche calendar that was only used for 12 years, in the late 1700s.

During lockdown, I found myself unravelling, to put it generously. Around me, it seemed, people were imposing rigours on their lives—organizing pantries, making sourdough, growing seedlings—while I neglected even normal chores like vacuuming. I had death-grip insomnia. My apartment began to feel like a pair of pyjamas I never changed. I had death-grip insomnia. My apartment began to feel like a pair of pyjamas I never changed.

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Pre-pandemic, I basically never had any idea what day it was, or sometimes even what month. But taken as a work of art, the calendar interested me, and none more than the French Republican Calendar (FRC). For thousands of years, our calendar in the West had been the result of a slow evolution, a collection of edits and tweaks to something that essentially worked. And then suddenly, in the 18th century, the French snapped. Fuelled by revolutionary fervour, they took it apart, put it back together, renamed things, then left five days at the end of the year uncontained by any month, just flapping in the breeze, and made them a festival called the Sansculotidès.

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Mostly bonkers and fraught with whimsy

Casting about for reasons I fell so hard for the French Calendar, I find myself looking for parallels between that era and ours. A reach, maybe, but there are echoes.

U.S. billionaires got 35 per cent richer during the pandemic—Jeff Bezos became the first person in history worth more than US $200 billion—while 20 million Americans lost their jobs. At the same time, BLM rallies drew unprecedented numbers into the streets—10 per cent of all Americans, according to one estimate.

In the late 1700s in France, the inequity cut a different way: the monarchy and the clergy represented the “one per cent,” while the poor were literally taxed to death. The result was a revolution so extreme that even time was rearranged. If we can throw out all the old institutions—the king’s head chopped off and buried at his feet! Feudalism gone! Priests exiled and killed in droves! Churches replaced with Temples of Reason!—why not fuck with the clock?

In 1793 the National Convention, France’s parliament, in a mania for empiricism, decided that the calendar we know today as Gregorian was founded too much in religiosity and an obsequious regard for emperors (jeudi, day of Jupiter; mercredi, day of Mercury; juillet, named for Julius Caesar, etc.). They wanted it replaced with something more rational, secular, and preferably metric—an aim which strikes me as delightfully irrational.

You might expect the revised calendar to be boring, dry, or, at the least, awkwardly propagandist. In some ways it is: after doing away with the names of the days, a commission du calendrier reconfigured the week into a unit of 10 days (metric!), renaming the days primidi, duodii, and so on—Oneday, Twoday, basically, up to Sundevi. What drew me to the calendar, what made it poetry and not simply math, was the government’s emphasis, according to sociologist Eviatar Zerubavel, on the importance of “natural phenomena to the life of the new society, thus expressing the belief of the French Enlightenment in the need for man to be in harmony with Nature.”

The sentiment seemed more beautiful and right to me than the model that told us we had dominion over all living things. In the spirit of this philosophy, the French calendar committee renamed the months according to the prevailing weather patterns—Brumaire, for instance. Ventôse, Germinal, Thermidor. Farmers, whose rights the revolution aimed to uphold, were devoted to their litany of Saints Peter and Paul, but rather to coriander.

Christmas went, very literally, to the dogs.
However high-minded and rational its aims, the French Republican Calendar was mostly bonkers, romantic, and fraught with whimsy. Adrift in timelessness, I needed its novelty, its daily regimentation, its material realness. Stress had short-circuited my brain. The Rural Calendar, from goat to lilac to trowel, would become my litany: both an escape from and an immersion in the material world.

Reviving Turnip Day

As the first COVID summer drew to a close, my shrunk world and its scenery acquired outsized significance. Travel, the usual form of escape, was impossible. And even if I could have left, I was now acutely aware of what a gift it was to nature when we humans all stopped flying and driving and Sea-Dooing around. How much of a din we had visited on the world for decades, if not centuries.

I watched videos of jellyfish scooting up Venetian canals, dolphins in Sardinia. Looked at pictures of a before-and-after sky in New Delhi. With humans locked up, the rest of the natural world began to re-establish its own rhythms. Birdsong mellowed, became more melodic. Looking out my window one misty, empty morning, I saw a red fox trot down the sidewalk past my house—a thing not seen before or since.

Mid-November, I found myself Googling pheasants and listening to online lectures about Dutch still lifes. Shortly after, I began casually informing my Instagram followers about sorb fruit; by Turnip Day, I had launched a separate account dedicated to the calendar.

Obviously I had thought about turnips before, but only as a Food To Be Avoided. I had never considered the history, the legacy, of the turnip. I discovered they were the original jack-o’-lanterns, considered the history, the account dedicated to the calendar. I discovered, was a character from Irish folklore (also called Stingy Jack), who, after crossing Satan, is doomed to roam the world between the planes of good and evil, with only an ember inside a hollowed turnip to light his way.

The FRC is not the only off-brand calendar out there—there is a pretty wild Persian one with months devoted to wolf killing and garlic collecting. Their depth-of-winter month, corresponding to a January/February period in our calendar, was simply known as “the Terrible One.”

An old Armenian calendar assigned names, not numbers, to each of the 30 days of the month, including “tumultuous day,” “hermit day,” and the enigmatic “beginning day” followed by the even more enigmatic “beginningless day” (corresponding to the 16th and 17th of the month, respectively).

A calendar followed by the Nisga’a of British Columbia also named months according to how nature influenced human lives: To Use Canoes Again (April). Leaves Are Blooming (May). Sockeye Salmon (June). To Eat Berries (July).

I too found myself orienting increasingly toward the way plants kept time: forsythias signalling the first pop of colour; crocuses managing to bloom despite wet snow; lilacs a wild riot of smell just as the weather turned kind; roses marking the beginning of too-hot midsummer, and so on. The FRC just formalized this. And it let me know that time was passing, that as surely as forsythia heralded November. It was popular in the Middle Ages and compared to “rich applesauce with hints of wine” and “overripe dates.” Due to its looks, it had the unambiguous nickname “open-arse fruit” (in French it is “cul de chien”).

On Pig Day I learned about the legend of the Pig-Faced Lady. I read up on feral Victorian sewer hogs; a Chinese pig god that brandished a nine-toothed rake; and a bipedal demi-pig, Jimmy Squarefoot, from Manx mythology. Hours of free time that would once have been given over to fretting were now purposeful. I garnered a small Instagram following.

The more cloistered my real life got, the more expansively and chaotically I researched. I devoted endless pandemic hours to the calendar, looking for obscure references and facts, running Japanese Wikipedia through Google Translate, reading catalogue copy from French seed growers, looking at PDFs of books on Indigenous folklore.

One day I surprised myself by identifying a scribbly delicate evergreen with pink pine cones: it was a tamarack tree, traditionally used to build snowshoes.

I was living more in harmony with the natural world, just as D’Églantine had intended. Which made every small troubling sign of its decline even more acute. I cheered on the Turkish dolphins leaping through Istanbul’s Bosphorus and the wild boars overtaking towns in Israel, but felt a little clutch in my gut, thinking it couldn’t last.

Between better and worse

With spring 2021 came the start of the vaccine push, and still the weather obliged: cool days, adequate rain, abundance of magnolias, linden blossoms, none of which (unusually for Toronto) got seared into papery disappointments before their time. I got my first shot on Larch Day, then went home and slept my deepest sleep in months. My second shot was on Acacia Day, during an elderflower season that stretched on for weeks, yellow clouds of perfume in the trees.

As the weather warmed, people began to emerge from their homes and gather in parks and on porches and patios. I started seeing photos on Instagram of the insides of airplanes. I went into a store that sold non-essentials and dawdled in air-conditioned comfort. I could hear the old surly
sound of rush-hour traffic. In June, a terrible heat wave struck the West Coast. An entire town combusted. A headline said millions of sea creatures were cooked to death. Forest fires near Toronto tinted the sun red, though somehow it also rained constantly. *Messidor*, a name which means “harvest month,” was the month of fire.

Finally, after being in one place for 15 months, I went on a weekend trip to a nearby cottage town. On Georgian Bay, a massive infestation of caterpillars had stripped half the trees down to their skeletons. Despite my profound happiness at being with friends, and the relief I felt at living free-range again—playing frisbee in the lake, hearing someone apologize for getting sunscreen on my bathing suit, watching families prepare breakfast on a motel barbecue—I couldn’t fully relax. As I stood outside holding my bike, a caterpillar dropped onto the asphalt next to me. “I’M SORRY! I’M SORRY!” I yelled as I pounded it to a pulp with my wheel. “I’M SAVING TREES!”

A vacation is meant for relaxation, but it can only remove you so far. When every place is in peril, there is no where to go: there is only when.

To move backward through time, to imagine myself in an era when humans and nature coexisted almost harmoniously, to imagine the feeling of being able to take every plant and animal for granted, was a balm.

I am not naive—I know that, had I been around in the 18th century, I would be dead by this point in my life, killed by dysentery or sepsis, or, worst of all, a big baby’s head stuck in my pelvis. Bad teeth, lice, no voting rights, primitive contraception; there are lots of reasons why I’m lucky to be around now. At every stage along the way, we humans seem to make things better as we make them worse. Like Stingy Jack, we roam the world, trapped between the planes of good and evil.

And I’m thinking now of one of those blessed cool spring mornings when I got up early. I crept down the alley and out the back gate, and, for the first time in her life, let the dog off her leash in the laneway. She bounded, tail high, for some squirrels on a nearby fence.

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Lisan Jutras is a journalist working in Tkaronto/Toronto. She has written for the *Walrus*, the *Globe and Mail*, *This Magazine*, *Hazlitt*, and *Maisonneuve*, and has been nominated for a National Magazine Award.