

# The Artist's Almanac

November 2005

**My Sorrow, when she's here with me,  
Thinks these dark days of autumn rain  
Are beautiful as days can be;  
She loves the bare, the withered tree;  
She walks the sodden pasture lane.**

- [Robert Frost, \*My November Guest\*](#)

The leaves underfoot crunch and rustle like old memories, and the sounds, no matter how hushed, are as crisp as autumn air. The rich smell of leaf mold is a pungent reminder that nature wastes nothing. Otis, the setter, enjoys it even more than I, as he frolics through a supermarket of smells.

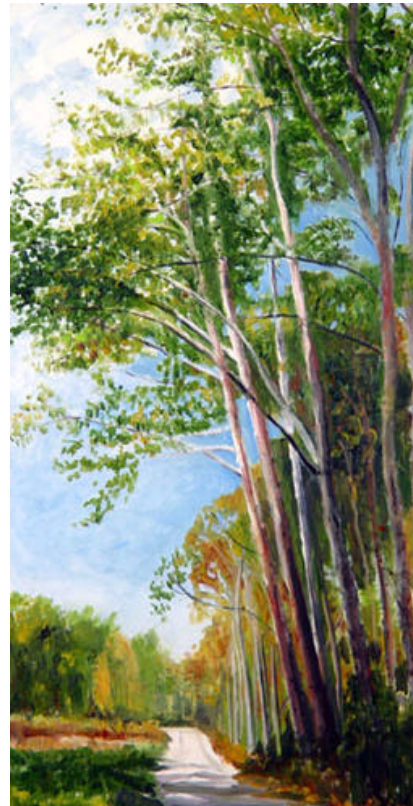
November is the season of recollection.

Smell, our surest animal memory, recalls the absent scent of mothers and fathers, old roses, autumn's first wood fire at Stonehearth, fresh coffee and roasting turkeys. A forensic handler once told me that dogs remember and accurately catalogue thousands upon thousands of scents and, properly trained, can even track fugitives in cars. Humans retain but a few hundred markers by comparison, and we are slightly embarrassed watching our pets sort out their social affairs with their noses. Perhaps that's how kissing began. Marketers understand this and tempt us in the shopping malls with potpourri and scented soaps, while masseurs tout a new service they call aromatherapy

Here in the woods there are no malls, though my dog shops about for trails of coon, possum, and squirrel and noting the boundaries marked by coyotes. I find beneath the largest red oak a rough vertical slab unnaturally placed and wonder what memory it marks. The prehistoric Indians used stones to line, not mark, the site of their graves; we walk unknowing over them. With no written language and only a few rough pictographs we do not even know their names. Their memory is lost, at least to us.

Memories need names. Of course, it could be a slave grave, as these were usually marked with rough vertical stones, though in family graveyards, not in the woods. Slaves were regarded as personal property, and as only three-fifths of a person for purposes of allocating votes in the US Congress. They were, however, granted first names, usually adopting their owners' last names for legal purposes. Many of their descendants, such as Alex Haley, search old records for their roots, while others have thrown out the whole regime and taken new names and memories. Memories are our identity.

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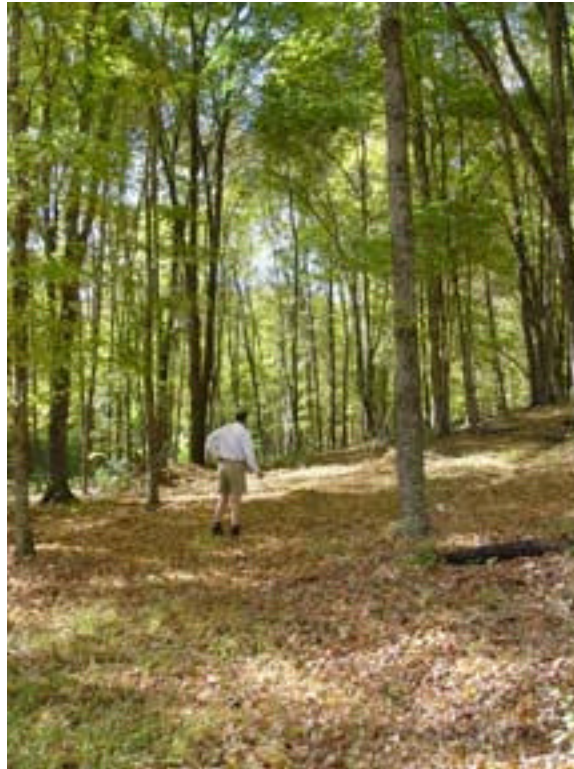


The Indians whom our ancestors first encountered had colorful names, such as Old Hop, Sequoyah, Dragging Canoe, Mad Dog, or Little Carpenter, their diplomatic chief who cobbled together peace treaties. Their names were often chosen to characterize the individual, while our surnames are chosen by genetic lottery. Given names offer more latitude and reflect our culture. I admire the pioneer women, with names like Patience and Hopeful. But my favorite is Thankful Doak. Inspector Morse hid his Quaker appellation of Endeavor, and I have always been fascinated by that of the furniture maker, Consider H. Willett. In the awesome process of naming offspring many today have discarded memory in favor of caprice or celebrity and given us names today like Rock, Misty, Tanya and Moon Flower.

Place names are another matter. I feel sorry for people who have to live on 38<sup>th</sup> Street. Often, a developers' only lasting renown is in the streets he names after himself. Imagination often trips into folly, as in the ungainly name for Rivergate Shopping Center, after the nearby Cumberland and the Gates Rubber Plant. Irony abounds, as well, as in the description of shopping malls such as Hundred Oaks and Hickory Hollow, the development of which removed the last of the towering forest from the site. Similarly, Green Hills and Cool Springs malls all share a common focus, not on the exterior surroundings for which they are named, but on their air conditioned interiors with synthesized sounds, aromas, and environments catering to every whim and fantasy.

Celebrity is what counts in our fast-moving cities, and the news media are its agents. Names are borrowed, emulated and stolen. Dr. Johnson points out that folks in the country remember longest the history of places and the battles fought there or the outrages among families two centuries before. As I shuffled through the dried leaves along DeShea's Creek yesterday in search of the perfect sycamore to paint, I reflected on the passage of the General's name from our county, as have many of those of the early pioneers such as Asher, Trousdale, Guild, Rogan, or Bledsoe. Their names survive only as the places which remember them or in the local descendants of the slaves they once owned and named, while their progeny have moved on to California.

Only corporations are perpetual, at least in the eyes of the law, and these often preserve the memory of their founder, long after he is gone. Fakes and Hooker is still a lumber company in Lebanon, celebrated in Ripley's Believe It or Not, while the owner of the latter name has forgotten lumber and move on to political notoriety. Perhaps the best inspired business name was Piggly Wiggly, the brainchild of the Memphis genius Clarence Sanders, who once came near to conquering Wall Street with his dazzle and who invented the grocery supermarket.



Few places are graced with a names as evocative as Falling Water River, Red Boiling Springs, Hidden Valley, Harmony Church and a wooded cove north of town, Cool Springs. Its name, used during three centuries by our family, has now been adopted by a mega-mall south of Nashville, confusing the reference. But the woods raise no protest, so long as the afternoon sun picks out the silver smooth trunks of beech and the spring still seeps from the rocks into this secluded hollow, sheltered from noise and wind by the hills around. In the woods today it all seems to turn to a millenium of mulch, marked by the rich aroma of leaves melting to earth.

Later this month we welcome the memory of our dear ancestors to our bountiful table. For this, for November, for shelter, and for memories of this good earth - of which we now have a greater store than do we of earthly expectations - for all of these, and for our names, we are all of us, Thankful.