

The Artist's Almanac

October 2005

*O hushed October morning mild,
Thy leaves have ripened to the fall;
Tomorrow's wind, if it be wild,
Should waste them all.
The crows above the forest call;
Tomorrow they may form and go.*

*O hushed October morning mild,
Begin the hours of this day slow.
Make the day seem to us less brief.
Hearts not averse to being beguiled,
Beguile us in the way you know.
Release one leaf at break of day;
At noon release another leaf;
One from our trees, one far away.*

- Robert Frost

Yesterday the heat clicked on for the first time since March and I began rummaging upstairs closets for corduroys. The air has a new clarity and the Indians, were they still around, might call this the 'time-of-shielding-eyes-against-sun-at-stop-lights'. Indian Summer was for them as it is for us a good time for getting out and going places – clear, dry, and cool enough for the searchlight sun to feel good.

The artist must not waste an hour now. Unnoticed fields weave themselves into elegant tapestries of sienna, russet, gold and red, garlanded with swoops of goldenrod. The hackberries, first to turn, flaunt their lemon leaves against a pure cerulean sky. Then they shower them down to blend unnoticed into our lawns. Maples leaves are tougher, matting and smothering our grass with their glory until we rake them – our toll for their summer shade and fall foliage.



The View from Poverty Hill
Plein air sketch made Sept 29
across the valley of Lick
Creek and Castalian Springs –
Bill Puryear

As the other trees hibernate for winter, the sycamores come into their glory. With their worthless

wood, tatty leaves, spiky fruits and tendency to drop limbs, they might not be counted our friends were it not for their splendid bodies. As they strip this month they reveal trunks shielded from summer sunburn, whiter than any swimsuit line. Standing tall they mark the creeks, or like seductive white sirens they call to the artist from distant hillsides where they flaunt themselves all winter before mauve woods.

This is high season for football. While games under lights may be exciting and late season championship games must start at noon to accommodate the television cameras, there is really nothing quite like a mid-afternoon game in October. These are perfect for tailgate parties and Vanderbilt is in first place in the SEC. I had an old friend and fellow alum who would have savored this rare moment.

Charles Parks died last week of a heart attack while bicycling in Italy on a tour he and his wife, Yancey, had planned for months. He was in good shape, lean, fit and well trained for the event. Now he is gone and his wife, his best friend, is alone in a strange land trying to make arrangements to return home

I can't remember when I didn't know him. We grew up playing in the same yards and I learned tennis, poker, and the boogie-woogie at his house. We attended the same schools, and churches. His uncle married my aunt, making us kin-to-kin. We fished and swam the same creek, and hunted the possum and the coon on dark nights with a friend's grandfather, who had time for twelve-year-old boys. These dark rural nights represented grand adventures for four small boys, with a pack of dogs, snuffling and scuffling and barking treed from distant field and stream. They were made even more of an adventure by Poppa, as we called him, who would not think of wasting precious batteries with flashlights and used instead a smoking kerosene lantern with a dim glow which turned every stump and hay bale into a looming threat.



Poppa Kee's – courtesy Mr. and Mrs. Tom McKee – artist, Bill Puryear

I still remember the clear night in the dead of winter when we four boys awoke after midnight and decided to go out in the night on our own. When we passed the old Turner cemetery and reached the hill above the junction of the Big and Little Creeks, we cut our lights to save batteries and stopped for a while to listen for the dogs. It was the first time I had really seen the starry

firmament. The black void was studded with the diamond points of millions of lights and the Milky Way was a brilliant road of sparkling dust swathed across eternity.

Poppa's house is a ruin now and the meadow where it sits is filled with manufactured homes whose ambient light has stolen the night sky from our view.

Some think of October as a time of loss; others see it as the first month of spring. Gardeners dig and divide bulbs of their glorious summer lilies and plant trees and shrubs whose roots will be nourished by December's rains to furnish a strong foundation for May's blooming. For the artist it is a time of recollection. For the Mexicans it is a time of visting with their dear dead in their cemeteries. Refusing to recognize anything so absurd as death, they bring food and sing and dance to celebrate life.

We join with our grandchildren in celebrating Halloween, parodying El Dia Del Muertos or All Hallows Eve. Like children we play, mocking death, carrying our flickering lanterns through dark fields, surrounded by imaginary threats, huddled together, our ambient light blinding us, both to the splendor of eternity and the light of the stars which fill the blackest hole as well as to the Artist who created them.

Charles was a superb athlete and allowed me to play golf with him. I last saw him when we finished a round in August. We both played tolerably well, and parted with the usual benediction.

Enjoyed it. See you, Charlie...

