

The Dance of Leaves

The breeze stirred every leaf on the tree. They shifted hues as the gentle wind flipped them this way and that. Dressed in autumn colors they prepared to fall, but time declared that they would have a few more days.

I imagined how Henry David Thoreau might have nodded and written a thoughtful essay. Thoreau was not there, nor was Walt Whitman, who might have danced with them, turning one way and then another. He would celebrate their electric bodies and their changing colors in a carnal proclamation of all humanity.

St. Francis might have rung a bell as he is said to have done for the rising moon. Startled citizens of Assisi left their beds to come running in search of a fire. They went home angry when he explained it was only the moon.

They grumbled, as did neighbors of Van Gogh when his madness became unbearable. He might have painted those leaves on canvas, surrounding each leaf with swirls of color to simulate the motion in the style of his *Starry Night*.

I could not image what Terry Tempest Williams, spokeswoman of desert canyons where trees are few and far between, might say. She might have searched the tree for evidence of an owl's nest or remembered cottonwoods swept away in a flash flood. She might have used them as a metaphor for recent losses in the world of conservation. The loss of most of the Bears Ears national monument prompted her to contemplate undoing and write a book titled *Erosion*.

Annie Dillard would likely pick a single leaf to examine. She might describe how the vein structure resembled a network of trails through the woods. The spots indicating that some decomposer was already at work on the leaf would certainly get her attention, just as a deflating frog at Tinker Creek once moved her to an intricate essay that only gave us the cause at the end. She lived in a cabin on Tinker Creek and Edward Abbey once christened her the heir to Thoreau.

I shot a video that did not do justice to the leaves and their changing colors. I wished I could see the world with the eye of one of the great thinkers. I felt the desolation for my humble craft.

Then, I remembered an old friend who said that imagination is the most powerful of nations. I traveled widely in that nation. The first stop was easy. I rang a bell in celebration of St. Francis.

The second stop required time travel. I became a fly on the wall of Van Gogh's room and watched him painting his *Starry Night*.

At Walden Pond, I became a kingfisher. Thoreau paused from hoeing his rows of beans and nodded. Perhaps he was contemplating trips on the nearby river, or out to Cape Cod.

Then I flew down to New York. Whitman did not notice me as he swam among the bathers. I wondered which edition of his one great book of poems he was working on now. I wished I had read his prose work *Specimen Days* as well as *Leaves of Grass*.

I journeyed to the red rock desert of the American west and took the form of a raven. High on a bluff, I saw Terry Tempest Williams instructing some desert writers. After making a particularly powerful point, she howled like a coyote as described in her book *An Unspoken Hunger*.

In the form of a heron, I saw Annie Dillard at Tinker Creek. A frog in the stream deflated, exactly as described in her book. The attacking giant water bug swam away.

Imaginings completed, I returned to the tree. Days had elapsed. The leaves had fallen.