

AUTUMN LEAF DROP PUTS YEAR TO BED

BY DANNY HEITMAN, *FORUM* EDITOR



As my wife and I settled into our new home nearly three decades ago, the man who delivered our piano

offered a cryptic prediction as he backed out the driveway.

“There will be no end of leaves,” he told me, pointing toward the huge green canopy of our sycamore. I nodded politely, not knowing quite what he meant, and his truck was already down the block before I could ask him to elaborate. His remark rang vaguely with portent, a bit like the warnings of village locals in horror movies who inform the newcomers that an old house is haunted.

There were, in fact, endless leaves on our sycamore, something I greeted in those first weeks at our new place as a great piece of news. The sycamore’s big crown, a lovely shade of lime, seemed as grand as the sail of a schooner when I spotted it out the kitchen window. We had moved in during the middle of July, when the sycamore was at its splendid best.

After decades with a sycamore, I’m learning that its annual litter of leaves can be a gift rather than a burden.

Within a month, a few leaves began to brown and fall, each one as big as a catcher’s mitt. By September, the leaf drop became a torrent, with piles a foot deep covering the lawn. One Saturday, while my wife escaped to the shopping mall, I worked my way through the lawn three times with our riding mower, hoping to mulch the mess into oblivion.

Returning hours after I’d finished, my wife gently asked me when I planned to tidy up the lawn. I stepped on the porch and understood my trouble. In short order, the tree had shed a new batch of leaves, rendering my hours of yard work moot. In buying a house with a sycamore, I’d become a suburban Sisyphus, condemned to roll the same rock up the same hill, with no apparent result.

With age, I’ve become more accepting of our sycamore’s autumn blizzard of leaves. I live in the Deep South, where white winters are rare. But as our lawn gets buried in leaves each fall, I think this must be similar to what a great snow feels like. Our landscape slowly sinks into sleep, the year put to bed until some distant kiss of spring stirs everything awake again.

That blanket of leaves, I’ve come to understand, helps protect a web of tiny living things that nourishes birds and other creatures I treasure. Seeing the lawn overcome by the leavings of autumn also reminds me that I’m not in control of everything, nor do I need to be.

My friend was right when he noted that outside my house every autumn, there would be no end of leaves. Maybe what I first heard as a curse has turned out to be a blessing.

DANNY HEITMAN (Southeastern Louisiana University) is editor of *Forum*. He frequently writes about literature and culture for other national publications, including *The Wall Street Journal* and *Humanities* magazine.