



One Hundred Stories

MATTHEW BATT

Tell Leif you're the names of things.

—Robert Hass, “Letter”

I AM RAKING LEAVES with my dog Maggie. She is black and white and iconic against all the colors, but she does not help much, neither does she frolic. She is depressed. The mailman—in this case a Latina mailwoman—has yet again spurned Maggie. My dog has a pure, unbridled kind of love for all letter carriers, male and female alike, but it is not always mutual.

Raking, I think, has been too long maligned. Raking is not so bad. A little repetitive, sure, but not heinous in any way. It's like combing someone else's hair, albeit with a rather large, ungainly metal comb. The red and silver, steel toothed kind you might have to use if the one you love has fleas or lice. But still, like combing hair, you can rake with tenderness and compassion, or you can do it with a kind of Silkwood zealotry, jerking the offending leaves with violent, jagged strokes. But it doesn't have to be weird. You can think of it as a sport. The stroke, after all, is not that different from hockey, cricket, or a nice chip shot. Either way, it's not that hard on your back. After a while you even begin to feel a little self-congratulatory about it. Quite the little steward of the earth, you think. A regular Florence Nightingale to the deciduous kind. John

Muir for the suburbs. Aldo Leopold of the lawn. Somebody should take your picture. Get you a plaque.

What is hateful about raking is that you cannot simply rake and be done. There is yet the bagging. At forty gallons a pop you gather the dead and dying and the rotten and the rotting in your arms and usher them into trash bags. You can't quite bring yourself to do it with glee or pride, not the way you were just raking like a joyful, elfin child. No, bagging is for the undertakers of the arbor world. Bagging is for the lawyers and the hit men and the accountants and the dog-spurning mailwomen.



The act of bagging is inherently futile and despotic. To pick up every last leaf and put it in its place—as if it were a lesson to all the other suicidal leafy types who think it's fine to just give up and fall, as if the season's name is some kind of hari-kari imperative—it's silly.

Fall. Go ahead. *Fall!* You sons of bitches. I'll get you all . . .

But wait, that's not right. You might be able to order someone to jump or let go, but you can't order them to fall. To fall implies a lack of volition, an accident. It would be different if the season were named *Jump*. But it's not. It's called fall and as we cannot choose who we love we cannot choose to fall. We simply can't stop ourselves. There's nothing we can do.

Fall is inertia. Entropy. The inevitable. The sweet promise of death.

It's gravity ignoring the urgent argument that is the ground.

Fall is a yellow light. It didn't start out that way. It won't end that way. The point at which you enter the intersection of seasons is unclear but not arbitrary. In a moment, all the lights will be red.

Fall is the frame in the series of photos when all of the horse's hooves are in the air. They gather centrally, under the belly, a purse.

Right before you hold your breath. The long inhale. A swelling. An expansion. An anticipation of absence.

Snow wheeling onto water.



My grandmother has been dead now longer than I can count in months, the way in which people with children are so good. I could count up to about twenty, but now all I know is that she's been gone for more than two years. The infancy of her death is over. Grandpa is still, however, enjoying his second adolescence with Terry, Gram's former nurse aide, but more secretly, more subtly than at first when he felt the need to ask me things like "How does a guy actually go about a *ménage à trois*?"

Mom and I don't talk about it. We've all kind of moved on from despair, but keep it with us, like a collection of rocks we carry in our pockets. Like Virginia Woolf, say, or a cocaine-addled cook I knew named Fu Man who carried stones in his trenchcoat to ward off "evil."



To try to put fall into words is like trying to get into a very, very crowded room. The door opens inward. You can squeeze in, knowing it's crowded, but not *how crowded*. Getting out is more difficult. You have to ask Keats to move to pull the door open. He coughs on your lapel, a little curse, but lets you out nonetheless. Fall is the preeminent literary default. As a subject, an object. A mode, motif—even a verb. The season itself is a kind of poetic hanging tree where among the slow swinging dead, pathos drips from every soon-to-be bare branch and we stand beneath, our mouths agape. Such hungry, hungry little birds. We can eat several times our own weight.

If summer is when we have sex and spring is when we are born and winter is when we die, then fall is, necessarily, when we see the train coming but can't get off the tracks. The bees shimmer with conspicuous intention, rimming your Coke can for every last molecule of sugar. The chipmunks hoard their nuts. The cat comes up with whole rhetorics of hunger to convince me that he has not *ever* been fed. The dog bats her delicate lashes, crosses her demure paws, as if she has not been sneaking from the yard to steal the neighbor child's toys or snacking from the litter box smorgasbord. The animals know nothing of the largess of Thanksgiving and Christmas—they are too far away, too abstract—and so when I start to gather the leaves they too start to hoard against that which they know not but are nonetheless scared to death.



When I lived in Madison, a giant dumptruck retrofitted with a vacuum the size of a swimming pool on its back would drive around and Hoover up the leaves everyone had piled on the boulevards. It seemed very civilized, except for the fear that our bothersome neighbor child named Keifer would get accidentally good at hide and seek at precisely the wrong time and get sucked up into the infinity that was the hold of that truck.

Where I grew up, in southeastern Wisconsin, people burned their leaves in their yards. Driving around my neighborhood was like surveying an encampment of wary, weary Union soldiers; huddles and clutches of sackcloth-clad men rung around mounds of fire. They'd look up at you from their empty hoods when you pass. Hollow eyes behind the wet smoke, demanding, *Which side are you on?*



What is the difference between fall and autumn? Why don't any other seasons have a more Victorian choice?

I tried to find out more, and even did a little linguistic research, only to stymie the Oxford English Dictionary itself. Rare is the word that makes the OED shrug and say a word is of "doubtful etymology." What does that even mean? That somebody just made it up? That it comes, rather than from other words, simply itself?



Fall puts most in mind for stockpiling and storing for winter. The back-to-school specials now begin in late July, florists, already in August, desperately try to spell boutonniere correctly on their signs, and Halloween and homecoming fittings grow urgent by early September. By the time it's finally cold enough to call for a layer of respectable flannel, we're so overcoated and unsensitized that we may as well have swapped our blood for antifreeze.

Make no mistake: I am a great consumer. A gaggle of gay men and debutantes could not outshop me. Plus, I know how to wait for sales and how to temporarily, strategically "misplace" merchandise—a 42 coat in *with the 52s?* *How could that have happened?*—and so I am never in want of getting and

spending. This is fine in the winter when, up north, no amount of layering could keep you from a bad case of the chilblains. And it is fine in the summer when the heat and the humidity conspire to make all clothing arbitrary and cruel. And in the spring, when the weather swings between poles like one of the Flying Wallendas, layers are the only defense. But in the fall, when the eruption of color flags an unavoidable end and then, cruelly, leaves you just alive enough to witness the slow bloodletting of the etherized earth—when it finally gets cold enough so that you cannot kid yourself about how much fun it would be if you were a railroad tramp—it is then that I want to molt.

I have too many clothes. Far, far too many clothes. The average American acquires 62 pounds of new clothes every year. If that's true of me, and if I had never thrown out any of my old clothes and I'm actually 31 years old, then that means I have or have had nearly 2,000 pounds of clothes so far. That is, literally, a *ton* of clothes. If I live to be eighty, that would grow to 4,960 pounds. Two and a half tons. Of clothes.

I got out my wife's kitchen scale to find out how this translates into a day. A Tuesday, say, in the middle of November. This is what I am wearing:

One Irish tweed vest	13 oz.
One blue long sleeve T-shirt	7 oz.
One leather belt, with brass buckle	7 oz.
One pair 34"x34" jeans (which are too big and too long) containing my wallet (one credit card, one driver license, \$27 in cash, and one of those "Rewards" cards from the grocery store so I don't have to keep asking the cashiers if they could just use theirs) and one pocket knife	2 lb. 7 oz.
One pair cotton socks, green, heavy-ish	4 oz.
One pair clogs	2 lb. 13 oz.
One watch, Timex	1 oz.

If I would have been arrested today by the Salt Lake City police or some invading band of fussy, overly weight-conscious marauders, that's all they would have found on me. It was all I needed to get by on a relatively cool mid-November day, more or less unscathed. My effects, they would have called them, and sealed them in an envelope for my progeny.

120 ounces. These are my effects.

I am not willing to weigh the rest of my clothes because it would take me all day and all night and I would undoubtedly break Jenae's kitchen scale, but I'm willing to bet that every linear foot of my hanging shirts weighs thirty pounds. Thirty pounds. I have two three-and a half-foot rods in my closet. That's seven feet. Two hundred ten pounds.

But what I have in my closet—in *shirts alone*—is a tenth of the supposed 2,000 pounds of clothes I've already had in my life. What I apparently can wear on any given day is only 7.5 pounds. So if I live to be eighty (29,200 days) and garner two and a half tons of clothes (4,960 pounds), as projected, with 7.5 pounds as the daily coefficient of wearage, I could wear an entirely different outfit 3,893 times.



I hate Halloween. I am an imposter of myself year-round, cycling through mask after mask, costume after costume. When confronted with the notion that I “get to dress up” for a day I find myself paralyzed. What do I do the rest of the year?

Utah, for what it's worth, best known for outfitting its young men into the sartorial equivalent of a tax attorney's wet dream, is positively sick over Halloween. And the more trumpy, the more gory, the better here. It is no wonder they are among the leaders of the nation in 1. divorce, 2. bankruptcy, 3. suicide rates among young people, 4. consumption of psychopharmaceuticals. But not on Halloween!



Two-hundred-ten pounds.

My shirts outweigh me by a good forty pounds.

That doesn't include all of my shoes and boots and socks and underwear and T-shirts and sweaters and jeans and jackets. Oh, the jackets. If I were to weigh the jackets it would kill me. I can't bear it.



Back in Boston, Jenae and I worked together on a pair of William Butler Yeats' closet dramas about mytho-historic Ireland. Jenae was the assistant director and I was Cuchulain, the impetuous king who favored "ferce women." In "The Only Jealousy of Emer," a highly stylized, Noh-influenced play about Cuchulain's love of a woman who would not have him, I needed a mask, so Jeff, the director, and my one-day wife were going to make one for me.

I remember Jeff's attic apartment in Brookline from the point of view of the floor. It had a steeply-pitched dormered ceiling and no real walls to speak of, and the place accordingly felt like a tent. They laid me out on a sleeping bag on the floor, some newspapers beneath my head as though what was about to be done to my face was going to be very messy. Just relax, Jeff said, though he seemed more nervous than I was. He had something of a crush on Jenae too, and so it must have felt like a very odd date to him.

Unless you go camping frequently, or are into kinky stuff with strangers, most people have never had people you don't really know kneel over you while you lie still. It is most disquieting. Jenae and Jeff bent close by my head, not quite sure what to do with their hands. Put this straw in your mouth, Jeff said, and just stay relaxed and breathe easy.

I closed my eyes and breathed, though I wouldn't say easily. The box fan in the window pushed the hot air around the attic, but heat from the rest of the house slid up through the forced air vents and the sleeping bag's sticky nylon offered nothing in the way of reprieve. Jenae dipped strips of newspaper in a bowl of boiled flour and water, began to lay them across my forehead, smoothing them out shyly at first and then, sweetly, with both hands.

I breathed through the straw. I relaxed. She laid a strip across my lips. And then another.

If I move too much, Jeff warned, the mask won't look like you.

I tried to slow my heart down, reminded myself that all the blood in my body, like the nutrients in a tree, moves through little tiny tubes much, much smaller than the straw in my mouth.

Later, my wife told me it was the first time she realized I was beautiful.



Nineteen coats. I just counted. I own nineteen coats. That's not including the four fleeces and three wool overshirts and then the packable raingear I keep in my bag. Nineteen coats. That's not including the six blazers and suitcoats I

own. Not including the cardigans or pullovers or hooded sweatshirts. Nineteen. Somebody ought to write a song.

There's the Navy peacoat I got from a surplus store.

The horsehide café racer jacket I found in a Madison junk shop.

The puffy down one. Gangsta/mountaineer hip.

The brass zippered worsted wool one that would go nicely with a Le Tigre shirt.

The waxed canvas one I got in Wales after I walked to Tintern Abbey and back.

There's the long, navy, silver-buttoned fireman's coat. For funerals, state functions, Tom Waits look alike contests.

There's the trenchcoat that makes me feel like a venture capitalist.

And the jean jacket. It makes me think of Bruce, my best friend from Texas. He owns *only* a jean jacket.

There's my red wool Scoutmaster coat. It makes me feel like a pedophile, but in a good way.

And then there's my red-and-black plaid Mackinaw. It could survive a nuclear winter.

And then there are all the rest. The other eight that I can't think of without looking. The others that I'm too mortified to include. How many is too many, I wonder. Certainly it is more than ten. Certainly too many is well ahead of nineteen.



If we took the average coat in my closet and measured its wingspan, we'd get about five feet. If we allowed each coat an additional six inches per missing hand for them to hold, it would give us 114 feet. If we assume that the average height per floor of a building is twelve feet, my coats lined up arm to arm would measure ten stories.

My coats, tied hand to hand, could save someone from the roof of a ten story burning building.

If we added my fleeces and blazers and sweatshirts to the line of my coats, they could reach twenty stories.

If we added the shirts hanging in my closet, together they could all reach almost 600 feet. That's taller than the tallest building in Milwaukee.

If we added all of my T-shirts and gave them arms and hands to hold on to

all of my jackets and shirts and sweaters and fleeces, they could reach 1,179 feet. One hundred stories.



The Empire State Building has 102 floors. I don't know which floors, if actually any, my great grandfather Emory worked on, but he was an ironworker there, and I think of it as ours, a little.

If the Empire State Building were a hole, and you were trapped at the bottom, I could pull you out if I tied all of my shirts and jackets together.



Somehow, as I rake and bag, more leaves have fallen. Fall has become intransitive. A gerund. Fall. Falling.

My lawn has again disappeared. Maggie and I are raking again a few days later. This time I build a compost box, thinking, That's right. You just wait and see Mister Forty-six-garbage-bags-full-of-rotten-leaves. I'll show you.

A book on organic gardening suggested that a three by three by three foot box would do just fine and yield quite a nice lot of compost in just a few week's time.

After raking about five minutes of leaves, the box is full.

It is getting dark and I don't have many bags left. I have already filled forty-six forty-gallon bags. That's 1,840 gallons of leaves. That's too many—too much—I don't care what it would fill. I am tired of doing math. But something about owning a house and the waning season has given me a mind for quantifying, for stock-taking, for reckoning.

It's going to be winter soon, and while I am curious how many swimming pools and cement trucks the leaves from my trees would fill, I don't care enough to figure it out. I need to get rid of some things. I have too much. I have too many.

I want winter with its visceral tally. A foot of snow is my shin. Two feet of snow is my thigh. Three feet, half of me.



The problem with bagging leaves is that there is no better way to do it. There are wide-mouth cans and spring-loaded baskets and flexible pieces of plastic

on which you pile the leaves and then roll them up and pour them into the bag. But none of them work better than raking them into piles, gathering them between your hands, and dropping them into the bag.

I am surprised how many leaves I can hold between my hands. They are medium-sized hands, but I can fill a forty-gallon bag in five minutes. And as I settle into it, it is no longer so terrible. Maggie is rediscovering our yard, its hidden smells, her bones, her toys. A stuffed frog, a stuffed pig, a once-stuffed dachshund (which is eerily cannibalistic, even for a dog). She has forgotten about the Latina mailwoman. I wish I knew what kind of trees were in my yard. The trunks are so big around that Jenae and I cannot quite reach each other if we hug the same tree. We need another set of hands.

And isn't that what fall is for? For the child we will one day have—the one we will name after my skyscraping great-grandfather—and because he will never be able to fly on his own, not even from a cannon, up into the woody embrace of a tree—puffy and cloud-like though their canopies suggest—he can and he will and he should and he *must* jump into a pile in our yard. The gentlest approximation of what must be the thrill of flying and courting death only to be caught and held aloft by a thousand little paper-thin hands. Hands that fell from the sky so that we needn't risk flying that high.



I gather leaves in my hands. They are not maples, I think. They are box elders. Maybe cottonwoods. I gather more leaves. I am on my knees and I spread my arms, palms down to the ground, and I gather the leaves into my hands. I put them in the bag and let go. Days ago, these leaves were in the air, trembling like secrets the tree didn't want to give up. But now it is cold. The tree let go. The leaves are in my yard. I am bagging them by hand.

I will touch every single leaf.