

Mordecai Marcus: On "Gathering Leaves"

In "Gathering Leaves" Frost makes a lighthearted return to a season of decline, which the speaker tries to bring to an end by struggling--endlessly, it seems--to fill bags of autumn leaves. Concise, homey similes show the difficulty of the task. Spades are spoonlike in their slight ability to gather the overflow of leaves; the airiness of the leaves makes full bags resemble balloons; the noise of rustling leaves, "like rabbit and deer / Running away," seems out of proportion to his progress. Gathered leaves make mountains, yet these are small. Once-colorful leaves, separated from their trees, have turned dull. But the task is joyous as well as frustrating in its playful physical engagements, and the elusive leaves become an amusing burden. The task seems endless and the gathered leaves slight and valueless. Still, the speaker celebrates what feels like a triumph with no end in sight--a matter of pure exuberance. This endless and elusive gathering may symbolize the persistent pursuit of unseen ends or the difficulty of artistic triumphs, but more likely Frost playfully treats the combined frustration and joy of a necessary cleansing whose chief goal is preparation for seasonal renewals though his baffled exertions create a pure ritual of activity enjoyed for its own sake.

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