

fall, a wide-open f-stop (f 2.8-3.5) is key. This complicates the challenge of getting the leaf in focus, but a wide-open lens lets more light into the camera, allowing the crucially fast shutter speed that these photos need. (The shutter, by the way, is often called a “leaf.”)

Because the leaf is often flitting rapidly in the dappled light of the woods, I focus the lens manually (autofocus is usually attracted to the background rather than the fast-falling leaf). I chase the leaf hither and thither all the way to the ground, hoping that at least some of it is in focus.

As with any artistic project, photographing falling leaves is best with some rules and constraints: No mendacious use of Photoshop with a leaf spilled into a better background. No manually throwing the leaves in the air or employing a ladder with a rhinestone-clad assistant atop it. No strings or monofilament line attached. And no monkey business like shaking the leaves out of the tree. Nothing but the leaf leaving its nine-month mooring by natural means.

Would simply watching the leaves fall without documenting them photographically bring the same pleasure of awakening? What changes the experience when you have a record of it? Thinking about falling leaves comes afterward, if at all. Watching the leaf zigging and zagging has forced me into the humble moment that is part and parcel to the grand connectedness of life.

Collectively, leaves and humans make a measurable impact on the Earth. Consider the Keeling Curve, the iconic study of the world’s fluctuating (increasing) CO<sub>2</sub> levels. Using measurements from instruments based on the top of Mauna Loa in Hawaii, the curve plots the cyclic variation of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere, looking something like jagged waves climbing a steep slope of beach. The upswings of the waves result in part from all of those billions of leaves decaying on the ground. The downswings are all the new leaves photosynthesizing and taking the carbon dioxide out of the atmosphere in the spring. The disturbing thing about the Keeling Curve is the steep climb it has been making over the years, a soar that is caused by you and me.

To get an idea about how many leaves fall, it’s best to step into the state of New Hampshire where “leaf peepers” come out en masse each fall, and long winters provide time to ponder questions about leaves. The *Telegraph Nashua*

newspaper reports that the 4 billion trees living in the state produce 1.9 million tons of fallen leaves each season, according to an estimate by the U.S. Forest Service. Staggering numbers considering the imperceptible weight of a leaf in the hand.

Soon the leaves will be stripped from the trees. Already my favorite falling leaf-producing red maple—which gets the full brunt of breeze—is shorn, a skeleton of bones stabbed into the increasingly cold ground. So today, for a few hours at least, I’ll watch the leaves fall one last time for the year. This time I won’t bring the camera or the metaphors. Instead I’ll attempt something I haven’t really done before. To watch them fall plainly, without preconceptions. Crackling leaves underfoot, flittering flights of fancy in the air, I open my senses to the moment.

Formerly from Santa Cruz, California, writer and photographer **Bruce Willey** moved due east to the Owens Valley to be closer to the mountains. He lives with his wife, daughter, and catahoula leopard hound. Considered by many to be the world’s foremost authority on falling leaf photography, Willey is also working on a novel titled *The Great Sierra Nevada Unconformity*, which won’t be published any time soon.

## BRUCE WILLEY

*Berlin Water*, 2016  
Archival Print, 16 x 20 in



COURTESY THE ARTIST