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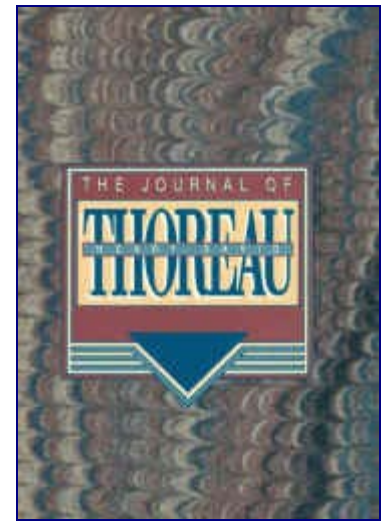


A READER'S JOURNAL

The Journal of Thoreau
by
Henry David Thoreau

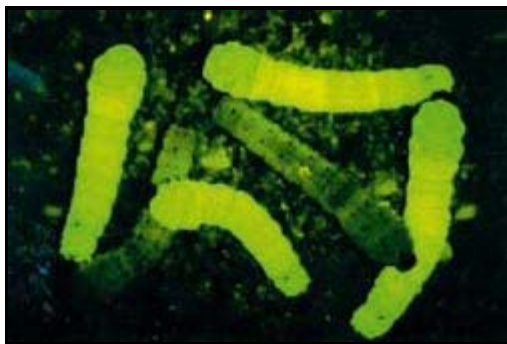
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A Book Review by Bobby Matherne ©2007



A decade of walks in the woods with Thoreau — that's what this review of Volume 10 of Thoreau's Journals marks for me. Hard to believe. I had these 14 volumes sitting on my library shelves since about 1977 when I bought them. On June 22, 2001 I began reading the first volume, and now I'm beginning the eleventh volume. In this volume I plan to add more photos of the flora and fauna that Thoreau gives the botanical name for as he discusses finding them in various stages of growth and reproduction. In the Spring portions of this volume he spends a lot of time talking about frog and fish spawn, some of which he keeps in a firkin (small wooden cask) in his residence. With that said, shall we begin our walk through Fall, Winter, and Spring with Henry?

He begins with a description of glow-worms, something that I only know about from the popular song of the last century.



[page 3, 4] Examining them by night, they are about tree quarters of an inch long as they crawl. Looking down on *one*, it shows two bright dots near together on the head, and, along the body, nine transverse lines of light, succeeded by two more bright dots at the other extremity, wider apart than the first. There is also a bright dot on each side opposite the transverse lines. It is a greenish light, growing more green as the worm is brought into more light. A slumbering, glowing, *inward* light, as if shining for itself inward as

much as outward.

That was a common name, so let's take a look at what a friend shows him of a flower with a Latin name, the *Lobelia Kalmii*.

[page 9] Edward Hoar shows me *Lobelia Kalmii*, which he gathered in flower in Hopkinton about the 18th of July. (I found the same on the East Branch and the Penobscot); staphylea (in fruit) from Northhampton, plucked with in a week or so (Bigelow says it grows in Weston); also the

leaves of a tree growing in Windsor, Vt., which they call the pepperidge, quite unlike our tupelo. Is it not the *Celtis crassifolia*? He says he found the *Uvularia perfoliata* on the Stow road, he thinks within Concord bounds.



It would be a marvelous way to use modern technology to print out for oneself photos of the plants and animals that Thoreau discusses in his journal, bind them into a notebook and take it along on a walk through the various areas he discusses. This would give one a view of how little or how much the areas have changed in the 150 years since Thoreau walked these areas of Concord and New England, carrying only a pad and pencil to record what he found. It has certainly given me an improved appreciation of the value of the Latin botanical names as a way of identifying specific plants which might have dozens of variations of local names, names which likely have changed several times over the decades since Thoreau wrote in his Journals.

In this next passage he records what Ralph Waldo Emerson told him about the local butterfly plant that was flowering. The *Asclepias tuberosa* is a favorite food of the monarch butterfly in the Eastern United States.



[page 15] R. W. E. says that he saw *Asclepias tuberosa* abundant and in bloom on Naushon last week; also a sassafras stump three feet across. The deer escape by running to the mainland, and in winter cross on the ice. The last winter they lost about one hundred and fifty sheep, whose remains have never been found. Perhaps they were carried off on the ice by the sea. Looking through a glass, E. saw vessels sailing near Martha's Vineyard with full sails, yet the water appeared perfectly smooth, and reflected the vessels. They thought this reflection a mirage, *i. e.* from a haze.

Thoreau tells us about reading in the *Tribune* newspaper about a man appearing to be seventy years old who gave his name as McDonald and said he was born in Scotland in 1745 and fought in the Revolutionary War. That would have made

him 112 years old, something unthinkable for a man who appeared to be about 70! Later Thoreau comes upon information which proves the man's claimed age to be correct.

[page 17] But I afterward remembered reading nearly a year ago of a man of this name and age in St. Louis, who said he had married a wife in Concord before the Revolution, and then began to think that his story might be all true. So it seems that a veteran of hundred and twelve, after an absence of eighty-seven years, may come back to the town where he married his wife in order to hunt up his relatives, and not only have no success, but be pronounced a humbug! !

One must acquaint oneself with some old terminology when one reads Thoreau's Journals. One is that the length of a rod is 16.5 feet or 5 meters. It must have been a commonly used measurement in Thoreau's day (or in his profession as surveyor) because he uses it rather often. Here's an example.

[page 36] Coming home through the street in a thunder-shower at ten o'clock this night, it was exceedingly dark. I met two persons within a mile, and they were obliged to call out from a rod distant lest we should run against each others. When the lightning lit up the street, almost as plain as day, I saw that it was the same *green* light that the glow worm emits. Has the moisture something to do with it in both cases?

In this next passage we learn one way that trees are planted in the wild. It shows how carefully Thoreau observes every event which occurs within his purview as he walks abroad in Concord and its environs. One can almost see the way squirrel hunters can contribute to the planting of forests by removing some of the de-planters from the forest. From a single stew of six squirrels, several trees may spring forth in the forest.

[page 39, 40] Sept. 24 Thursday. A. M. — Up the Assabet.

The river is considerably raised and also muddied by the recent rains.

I saw a red squirrel run along the bank under the hemlocks with a nut in its mouth. He stopped near the foot of a hemlock, and, hastily pawing a hole with his fore feet, dropped the nut, covered it up, and retreated part way up the trunk of the tree, all in a few moments. I approached the shore to examine the deposit, and he, descending betrayed no little anxiety for his treasure and made two or three motions to recover the nut before he retreated. Digging there, I found two pignuts joined together, with their green shells on, buried about an inch and a half in the soil, under the red hemlock leaves. This, then, is the way forests are planted. This nut must have been brought about twenty rods at least and was buried at just the right depth. If the squirrel is killed, or neglects its deposit, a hickory springs up.

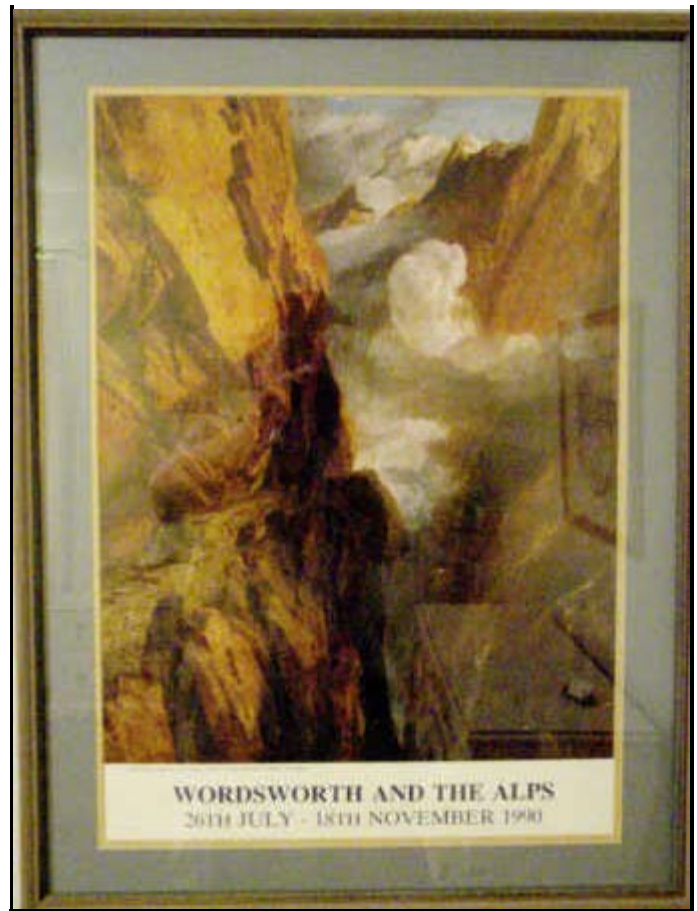
Thoreau studies a red squirrel intensely on Oct. 5 and reveals to us several possible origins of the name "squirrel."

[page 65, 66] He gets down the trunk at last on to a projecting knot, head downward, within a rod of you, and chirrups and chatters louder than ever. Tries to work himself into a fright. The hind part of his body is urging the forward part along, snapping the tail over it like a whip-lash, but the fore part, for the most part, clings fast to the bark with desperate energy. *Squirr*, "to throw with a jerk," seems to have quite as much to do with the name as the Greek *skia oura*, shadow and tail.

Thoreau described Nature directly and immediately as someone who was out-of-doors constantly. He pushed his hand into the underwater mudhole nests of the pout and pulled one out. He pulled a handful of frogs coupling from the water. He hit the thin sheet of ice on a pond and stunned the turtles under the surface. He trusted only his direct experience with Nature and distrusted those such as Ruskin who wrote indirectly about Nature as JWM Turner painted her, for example.

[page 69] I have just read Ruskin's "Modern Painters." I am disappointed in not finding it a more out-of-door book, for I have heard that such was its character,

but its title might have warned me. He does not describe Nature as Nature, but as Turner painted her, and though the work betrays that he has given a close attention to Nature, it appears to have been with an artist's and critic's design. How much is written about nature as somebody has portrayed her, how little about Nature as she is, and chiefly concerns, *i. e.* how much prose, how little poetry!



As if to correct the over-emphasis on prose in descriptions of Nature, Thoreau spots a distant elm tree a couple of days later and segues into a poetic idyll of an ordinary New England scene. One cannot imagine that Turner could capture the beauty with his brush which Thoreau paints with his pencil in words below.

[page 89] The elm, I think, can be distinguished further than any other tree, and, however faintly seen in the distant horizon, its little dark dome, which the thickness of my nail will conceal, just rising above the line of the horizon, apparently not so big as a prominence on an orange, it suggests ever the same quiet rural and domestic life passing beneath it. It is the vignette to an unseen idyllic poem. Though that little prominence appears so dark there, I know that it is now a rich brownish-yellow canopy of leaves, whose harvest-time is already come, sending down its showers from time to time. Homestead telegraphs to homestead through these distant elms seen from the hilltops. I fancy I hear the house-dog's bark and lowing of the cows asking admittance to their yard beneath it. The tea-table is spread; the master and mistress and the hired men now have just sat down in their shirt-sleeves. Some are so lifted up the horizon that they seem like portions of the earth detached and floating off by themselves into space. Their dark masses against the sky can be seen as far, at least, as a white spire, though it may be taller.

Thoreau again waxes lyrical in this next passage wherein he compares the sand banks of White Pond to the commercial banks of Suffolk and New York. He makes his deposit in these "country banks" and knows that his deposits are secure no matter if New York banks collapse or not. His is capital simplicity and contentment. Even withered goldenrod is a success and when in full bloom, no one can counterfeit it as one might counterfeit money. He shows us how his country banks of sand are more permanent than the city banks of granite.

[page 92, 93] Oct. 14. P. M. — To



White Pond.

Another, the tenth of these memorable days. We have had some fog the last two or three nights, and this forenoon it was slow to disperse, dog-day-like, but this afternoon it is warmer even than yesterday. I should like it better if it were not so warm. I am glad to reach the shade of Hubbard's Grove; the coolness is refreshing. It is indeed a golden autumn. These ten days are enough to make the reputation of any climate. A tradition of these days might be

handed down to posterity. They deserve a notice in history, in the history of Concord. All kinds of crudities have a chance to get ripe this year. Was there ever such an autumn? And yet there was never such a panic and hard times in the commercial world. The merchants and banks are suspending and failing all the country over, but not the sand-banks, solid and warm, and streaked with bloody blackberry vines. You may run upon them as much as you please⁽¹⁾, — even as the crickets do, and find their account in it. They are the stockholders in these banks, and I hear them creaking their content. You may see them on change any warmer hour. In these banks, too, and such as these, are my funds deposited, a fund of health and enjoyment. Their (the crickets) prosperity and happiness and, I trust, mine do not depend on whether the New York banks suspend or no. We do not rely on such slender security as the thin paper of the Suffolk Bank. To put your trust in such a bank is to be swallowed up and undergo suffocation. Invest, I say, in these country banks. Let your capital be simplicity and contentment. Withered goldenrod (*Solidago nemoralis*) is no failure, like a broken bank, and yet in its most golden season nobody counterfeits it. Nature needs no counterfeit-detector. I have no compassion for, nor sympathy with, this miserable state of things. Banks built of granite, after some Grecian or Roman style, with their porticoes and their safes of iron are not so permanent and cannot give me so good security for capital invested in them, as the heads of withered hardhack (RJM: *spirea tomentosa*, pink spike below right) in the meadow. I do not suspect the solvency of these. I know who is their president and cashier.

The quotation in [footnote 1](#): "If you should slump, 't is to a finer sand." is included because it hints of a famous quote by Thoreau's great friend and frequent companion, Ellery Channing, who is the "C." who appears so often in his Journals. Channing's [quote](#) goes, "If my bark sinks, 'tis to another sea." Thoreau speaks of the sand of his country banks and says that if one shelf of sand breaks through, it reveals a finer sand beneath it.

As I write these words on July 3, 2007 it is easy for me to think of soldiers in brightly colored uniforms playing marches for the Fourth of July celebrations tomorrow. One



catches below a glimpse of Thoreau and his ambivalent relationship to music. There is a hint that he could become addicted to music the way others get addicted to alcohol, and he must therefore allow himself music only in moderation. Thoreau also compares the bright colors of their uniforms to the bright colors of the Fall leaves in mid-October.

[page 103] Oct. 17. Saturday. Very high wind in the night, shaking the house. I feel it taking hold under the eaves, which project at the end of the house, each time with a jerk. Some rain also, and these two bring down the leaves. A great many more ash trees, elms, etc., are bare now.

What a new beauty the blue of the river acquires, seen at a distance in the midst of the various-tinted woods, great masses of red and yellow, etc.! It appears as color, which ordinarily it does not, — elysian.

The trainers are out with their band of music, and I find my account in it, though I have not subscribed for it. I am walking with a hill between me and the soldiers. I think, perhaps, it will be worth the while to keep within hearing of these strains this afternoon. Yet I hesitate. I am wont to find music unprofitable; it is a luxury. It is surprising, however, that so few habitually intoxicate themselves with music, so many with alcohol. I think, perchance, I may risk it, it will whet my senses so; it will reveal a glory where none was seen before. It is remarkable that men too must dress in bright colors and march to music once in the year. Nature, too, assumes her bright hues now, and think you a subtle music may not be heard amid the hills? No doubt these strains do sometimes suggest to Abner, walking behind in his red-streaked pants, an ideal which he had lost sight of, or never perceived. It is remarkable that our institutions can stand before music, it is so revolutionary.

Thoreau eats acorns but admits that they are an acquired taste which comes from a constant exposure to the out-of-doors.

[page 103, 104] Glossy-brown white oak acorns strew the ground thickly, many of them sprouted. How soon they have sprouted! I find some quite edible, but they too, like wild apples, require an outdoor appetite. I do not admit their palatableness when I try them in the house. Is not the outdoor appetite the one to be prayed for?

I was invited to share a piece of watermelon with our good friend Rosie Harris one afternoon this week. Rosie is about twenty years older than I am, and she had placed a salt shaker on the table for us to use.

This is an old Louisiana custom that I had not observed in California or New England when I lived there. She said it improves the taste. But I did notice that she put no salt on her watermelon, and neither did I.

I had been thinking a couple of days earlier about why we always used to salt our watermelons when I was a child. My mom and other moms always placed a salt shaker on the table with the watermelon, and most people, kids and adults alike, lightly salted their watermelon. If asked why, they said, "It made the watermelon *taste better*." And yet it's been years since I salted my watermelon. I actually tried doing it a few years ago and found it not palatable with the salt. What is it that makes food palatable seems to be the clue to this mystery, and if so, it also explains what Thoreau calls the "outdoor appetite."

We have an open bag of salted pretzels in our kitchen, a food snack I rarely if ever eat. But I noticed that one or two pretzels a day tasted particularly good while I have been on my diet which consists mostly of fruit. It occurred to me that my diet lacked salt and the couple of small pretzels tasted good, were palatable to me, exactly because my body was requiring salt. Thus, it came to me that what is palatable to one at a given moment is determined by what one's body requires.

When we ate watermelon when I was a kid and certainly when Rosie was a kid, we ate it to cool off in the heat of the summer at a time *when there was no air-conditioning*. We had generally been very active, and when we sat down to eat watermelon, our bodies craved some salt to replace that lost due to perspiration, which in South Louisiana can be profuse in the summer time. The watermelon had no salt in it, so sprinkling salt on the watermelon actually enhanced the palatability of the watermelon. Fast-forward to 2007 and Rosie's air-conditioned kitchen, and the salt shaker was made available, but was not used. Rosie provided the salt, but neither of us used it.

Can it not be that Thoreau's taste for the white oak acorns in the out-of-doors was increased by his body's need for something like salt? Something that, by the time he had returned to his house, his body no longer needed?

Thoreau also admired an old man he saw carrying an axe in one hand and carrying his shoes stuffed with wild apples and a dead robin in his other hand as he walked barefooted along the road. His pockets were also full of apples and together with his shoes carried essential food for his larder. He will share the food he carries and the stories of how he obtained it with his wife when he reaches his home. No doubt the food will be made more palatable to both of them by the stories he has to tell.

[page 109, 110] I had gone but little way on the old Carlisle road when I saw Brooks Clark, who is now about eighty and bent like a bow, hastening along the road, barefooted, as usual, with an axe in his hand; was in haste perhaps on account of the cold wind on his bare feet. . . . When he got up to me, I saw that besides the axe in one hand, he had his shoes in the other, filled with knurly apples and a dead robin. He stopped and talked with me a few moments; said that we had had a noble autumn and might now expect some cold weather. I asked if he had found the robin dead. No, he said, he found it with its wing broken and killed it. He also added that he had found some apples in the woods, and as he hadn't anything to carry them in, he put 'em in his shoes. They were queer-looking trays to carry fruit in. How many he got in along toward the toes, I don't know. I noticed, too, that his pockets were stuffed with them. His old tattered frock coat was hanging in strips about the skirts, as were his pantaloons, about his naked feet. He appeared to have been out on a scout this gusty afternoon, to see what he could find, as the youngest boy might. It pleased me to see this cheery old man, with such a feeble hold on life, bent almost double, thus enjoying the evening of his days. Far be it from me to call it avarice or penury, this childlike delight in finding something in the woods or fields and carrying it home in the October evening, as a trophy to be added to his winter's store. Oh, no; he was happy to be Nature's pensioner still, and bird-like to pick up his living. Better his robin than your turkey, his shoes full of apples than your barrels full; they will be sweeter and suggest a better tale. He can afford to tell how he

got them, and we to listen. There is an old wife, too, at home, to share them and hear how they were obtained. Like an old squirrel shuffling to his hole with a nut. Far less pleasing to me the loaded wain, more suggestive of avarice and of spiritual penury.

Brooks was a man who lived the way Thoreau did. Two men to whom pockets full of food were more desirable than food-laden wagons which smack of material greed and spiritual poverty.

Thoreau spent little time inside churches praying; he found his prayers like he found his food, out-of-doors. His spiritual appetite was whetted by adventitious ministers such as Brooks Clark who provided, as he hastened home to his wife that evening, a week's worth of holiness and prayer for Thoreau — and for us if we but ponder on his words below.

[page 110] This old man's cheeriness was worth a thousand of the church's sacraments and *memento mori's*. It was better than a prayerful mood. It proves to me old age as tolerable, as happy, as infancy. I was glad of an occasion to suspect that this afternoon he had not been at "work" but living somewhat after my own fashion (though he did not explain the axe), — had been out to see what nature had for him, and now was hastening home to a burrow he knew, where he could warm his old feet. If he had been a young man, he would probably have thrown away his apples and put on his shoes when he saw me coming, for shame. But old age is manlier; it has learned to live, makes fewer apologies, like infancy. This seems a very manly man. I have known him within a few years building stone wall by himself, barefooted.

Without a doubt, Thoreau could be called one of the first tree-huggers. When Melvin tells him that Sted sold the trunk of a pasture oak to Garty for ten dollars and several cords of wood, here's what Henry had to say about that, "What a mean bribe to take the life of so noble a tree!" We would say it was a measly sum to receive in place of such a beautiful living tree.

To get an idea of how inflation has devalued our currency in a mere 150 years, read this passage about how an honest man would give change to within a tenth of a cent (*i. e.* a mill) in those days and there were coins for the mill as well as the half-cent.

[page 113] It would seem as if men generally could better appreciate honesty of the John Beaton stamp, which gives you your due to a mill than the generosity which habitually throws in the half-cent.

Authors of novels write about their imaginary heroes who always bear some relationship to the author. Of poets, Thoreau says, we do not want to know of some imaginary hero, some *J. Alfred Prufrock* perhaps, but to know of how the *poet* lived. Thus he places his Journal in the genre of an autobiography of a poet.

[page 115] Is not the poet bound to write his own biography? Is there any other work for him but a good journal? We do not wish to know how his imaginary hero, but how he, the actual hero, lived from day to day.

Like his sermons, Thoreau received his firewood adventitiously and loved it the more for its accidental acquisition during his hikes abroad. His fire was not made from trees who died prematurely by the swing of an axe, but from wood already felled by old age or lightning. Even so he did not settle for trashy wood, but instead he selected only the best wood for his hearth.

[page 116] That big swamp white oak limb or tree which I found prostrate in the swamp was longer than my boat and tipped it well. One whole side, the upper, was covered with green hypnum, and the other was partly white with fungi. That green coat adhered when I split it. Immortal wood! that had begun to live again. Others burn unfortunate trees that lose their lives prematurely. These old stumps stand like anchorites and yogis, putting off their earthy garments, more and more sublimed from year to year, ready to

be translated, and then they are ripe for my fire. I administer the last sacrament and purification. I find old pitch pine sticks which have lain in the mud at the bottom of the river, nobody knows how long, and weigh them I up, — almost as heavy as lead, — float them home, saw and split them. Their pitch, still fat and yellow, has saved them for me, and they burn like candles at last. I become a connoisseur in wood at last, take only the best.

Thoreau said that no empty lot in his neighborhood existed in which one could not find a stone arrowhead made by extinct natives. Why should we make so much of Greeks and Romans and ignore the Indians, he asked. We should not go to faraway places to write or to see famed gardens.

[page 118] New earths, new themes expect us. Celebrate not the Garden of Eden, but your own.

He admires the chestnut and describes in detail how Nature has adorned and protected all the while leaving diamonds barely clad in the dirt to fend for themselves! "What a perfect chest the chestnut is packed in!" (Page 121) To him, picking chestnuts itself is a worthy meditation.

[page 125] I find my account in this long-continued monotonous labor of picking chestnuts all the afternoon, brushing the leaves aside without looking up, absorbed in that, and forgetting better things awhile. My eye is educated to discover anything on the ground, as chestnuts, etc. It is probably wholesomer to look at the ground much than at the heavens. As I go stooping and brushing the leaves aside by the hour, I am not thinking of chestnuts merely, but I find myself humming a thought of more significance. This occupation affords a certain broad pause and opportunity to start again afterward, — turn over a new leaf.

In Thoreau we find a man truly at peace with himself and his lot in life. Every day is a wonder to him and he rides through the seasons as a child on a carousel. It is not a boring-go-round, but a *merry-go-round* to the child-like Thoreau who is eager to go around again and again with ever-increasing wonderment and joy.

[page 127] These regular phenomena of the seasons get at last to be . . . simply and plainly phenomena or phases of my life. The seasons and all their changes are in me. I see not a dead eel or floating snake, or a gull, but it rounds my life and is like a line or accent in a poem. Almost I believe the Concord would not rise and overflow its banks again, were I not here. After a while I learn what my moods and seasons are. I would have nothing subtracted. I can imagine nothing added. My moods are thus periodical, not two days in my year alike. The perfect correspondence of Nature to man, so that he is at home in her!

Many people have commented on how watching an eagle gracefully gliding across the sky can send their thoughts soaring, but who but Thoreau would write about his sparrow thoughts?

[page 128] Those sparrows, too, are thoughts I have. They come and go; they flit by quickly on their migrations, uttering only a faint *chip*, I know not whither or why exactly. One will not rest upon a twig for me to scrutinize it. The whole copse will be alive with my rambling thoughts, bewildering me by their very multitude, but they will be all gone directly without leaving me a feather. My loftiest thought is somewhat like an eagle that suddenly comes into the field of view, suggesting great things and thrilling the beholder, as if it were bound hitherward with a message for me; but it comes no nearer, but circles and soars away, growing dimmer, disappointing me, till it is lost behind a cliff or a cloud.

The theme of the seasons on pages 127 through 130 inspired me to write this poem of the seasons using

some of the details of each season laid down by Thoreau in these pages:

**Seasons come and seasons go
Winter falls with little show
But nothing eludes the glimpse
Of Henry David Thoreau.**

**The wind and rain have come
To settle their accounts for Fall
And washed the snow-fleas
From the meadow's trees.**

**Winter's springs are overfull
And the ducks can fly away;
We can stock our firewood
For the chilly winter's day.**

When we read Shakespeare's writing, we become acquainted with the writer, but not with the one who lived during the writing. The amazing thing about the recent movie "Shakespeare in Love" was that we could see the writer living during the time he was writing and acting in his own plays! It was just such a production that Thoreau bemoans the lack of below.

[page 131] The real facts of a poet's life would be of more value to us than any work of his art. I mean that the very scheme and form of his poetry (so called) is adopted at a sacrifice of vital truth and poetry. Shakespeare has left us his fancies and imaginings, but the truth of his life, with its becoming circumstances, we know nothing about. The writer is reported, the liver not at all. Shakespeare's house! how hollow it is! No man can conceive of Shakespeare in that house. But we want the basis of fact, of an actual life, to complete our Shakespeare, as much as a statue wants its pedestal. A poet's life with this broad actual basis would be as superior to Shakespeare's as a lichen, with its base or thallus, is superior in the order of being to a fungus.

Thoreau sat on Conantum and watched the sun set on October 28 and recorded seeing a beam of light break through the gray clouds. His description of this scene includes both the external beauty and his reverie which it sparked within himself.

[page 133] It was but a transient ray, and there was no sunshine afterward, but the intensity of the light was surprising and impressive, like a halo, a glory in which only the just deserved to live. . . . It was a serene, elysian light, in which the deeds I have dreamed of but not realized might have been performed. At the eleventh hour, late in the year, we have visions of the life we might have lived. No perfectly fair weather ever offered such an arena for noble acts. It was such a light as we behold but dwell not in! In each case, every recess was filled and lit up with this pure white light. The maples were Potter's, far down the stream, but I dreamed I walked like a liberated spirit in their maze.

Thoreau loves the wild apples and compares himself to them. "Nevertheless, *our* wild apple is wild only like myself, perchance, who belong not to the aboriginal race here, but have strayed into the woods from the cultivated stock." [\(2\)](#) We can read what he says in the passage below and perhaps come to believe that Thoreau himself was a "prince in disguise."

[page 136, 137] Even the sourest and crabbedest apple, growing in the most unfavorable position, suggests such thoughts as these, it [is] so noble a fruit. Planted by a bird on a wild and rocky hillside, it bears a fruit, perchance, which foreign potentates shall hear of and send for, though the virtues of the owner of the soil may never be heard of beyond

the limits of the village. It may be the choicest fruit of its kind. Every wild apple shrub excites our expectation thus. It is a prince in disguise, perhaps.

Imagine a wild apple tree eaten by cattle until it can bear no fruit and finally the shrub gets so wide that the cattle are unable to reach the interior shoots and the fruit can grow there. The wild apple tree has that way created a fence out of its own material. Thoreau seemed to create a fence around himself with his own wild apple ways. Small wonder he revered the wild apple so — it was a plant which survived as he did, in the wild, away from any tended garden or orchard. Like him, it produced the sweetest fruit, but only for those who loved solitary walks in the forest and had cultivated an out-of-doors palate.

[page 137, 138] What a lesson to man! So are human beings, referred to the highest standard, the celestial fruit which they suggest and aspire to bear, browse on by fate, and only the most persistent and strongest genius prevails, defends itself, sends a tender scion upward at last, and drops its perfect fruit on the ungrateful earth; and that fruit, thought somewhat smaller, perchance, is essentially the same in flavor and quality as if it had grown in a garden. That fruit seems all the sweeter and more palatable even for the very difficulties it has contended with.

The skunk cabbage is like a warm-blooded animal in that it can continue to grow and thrive in cold weather, even melting the snow around itself. The heat it creates also sends the strong scent from which its name derives over longer distances to attract pollinators. To Thoreau this plant was a symbol of optimism and rebirth in the dark months of the year and a sure cure for melancholy which is now call SAD or Seasonal Affective Disorder. As Thoreau rightly says, "There is no can't nor cant to them."

[page 150] Oct. 31. If you are afflicted with melancholy at this season, go to the swamp and see the brave spears of skunk cabbage buds already advanced toward a new year. Their gravestones are not bespoken yet. Who shall be sexton to them?⁽³⁾ Is it the winter of their discontent? Do they seem to have lain down to die, despairing of skunk-cabbagedom? "Up and at 'em," "Give it to 'em," "Excelsior," "Put it through," — these are their mottoes. Mortal human creatures must take a little



respice in this fall of the year; their spirits do flag a little. There is a little questioning of destiny, and thinking to go like cowards to where the "weary shall be at rest." but not so with the skunk-cabbage. Its withered leaves fall and are transfixed by a rising bud. Winter and death are ignored; the circle of life is complete. Are these false prophets? Is it a lie or a vain boast underneath the skunk-cabbage bud, pushing it upward and lifting the dead leaves with it? They rest with spears advanced; they rest to shoot!

I say it is good for me to be here, slumping in the mud, a trap covered with withered leaves. See those green cabbage buds lifting the dry leaves in that watery and muddy place. There is no can't nor cant to them. They see over the brow of winter's hill. They

see another summer ahead.

Thoreau says that he doesn't wish to see poor men in rich houses, but would rather see one rich man in a poor house. Men should build with local materials that they can afford and not crave for expensive materials from a distant land. That can only lead to bankruptcy, he says. (Page 165)

[page 165, 166] For a man to pride himself on this kind of wealth, as if it enriched him, is as ridiculous as if one struggling in the ocean with a bag of gold on his back would gasp out, "I am worth a hundred thousand dollars!" (4) I see his ineffectual struggles just as plainly, and what it is that sinks him.

Have you seen the bumper stickers with the theme, "I Rather Be X", where X usually involves being in some other place skiing, sun-bathing, sky-diving, golfing, etc? Anyone who wishes to be somewhere else "excommunicates oneself" according to Thoreau, in other words, such a one is put out of communion or fellowship with oneself. Such a person is without roots in one's native soil, and thus too in one's own soil of being. Thus, it follows for Thoreau that the poet should be the hardest person to transplant to another area. The poet does not need to see the Pyramids to think Pyramid thoughts.

[page 190, 191] In books, that which is most generally interesting is what comes home to the most cherished private experience of the greatest number. It is not the book of him who has traveled the farthest over the surface of the globe, but of him who has lived the deepest and been the most at home. If an equal emotion is excited by a familiar homely phenomenon as by the Pyramids, there is no advantage in seeing the Pyramids. It is on the whole better, as it is simpler, to use the common language. We require that the reporter be very permanently planted before the facts which he observes, not a mere passer-by; hence the facts cannot be too homely. A man is worth most to himself and to others, whether as an observer, or poet, or neighbor, or friend, where he is most himself, most contented and at home. There his life is the most intense and he loses the fewest moments. Familiar and surrounding objects are the best symbols and illustrations of his life. If a man who has had deep experiences should endeavor to describe them in a book of travels, it would be to use the language of a wandering tribe instead of a universal language. The poet has made the best roots in his native soil of any man, and is the hardest to transplant. The man who is often thinking that it is better to be somewhere else than where he is excommunicates himself. If a man is rich and strong anywhere, it must be on his native soil. Here I have been these forty years learning the language of these fields that I may the better express myself. If I should travel to the prairies, I should much less understand them, and my past life would serve me but ill to describe them. Many a weed here stands for more of life to me than the big trees of California would if I should go there. We only need travel enough to give our intellects an airing.

Is it so strange these days to prefer to be alone than in the company of others? Can one think and share large thoughts among those for whom the very concept of large thoughts is incomprehensible? And yet is that not the lot of so many people today? Thoreau knew this well and was unafraid of expressing it.

[page 204] I do not know if I am singular when I say that I believe there is no man with whom I can associate who will not, comparatively speaking, spoil my afternoon. That society or encounter may at last yield a fruit which I am not aware of, but I cannot help suspecting that I should have spent those hours more profitably alone.

Thoreau no doubt had a healthy appetite and as such enjoyed eating the simplest foods. He explains his love of everyday sounds by analogy to an appetite for sounds. Anyone who has entered a reduced calorie or other eating regimen will have noted before long that one is suddenly able to taste a sweetness in common vegetables such as green beans which was not discernible before when one's appetite was cloyed by a surfeit of heavy foods.

[page 227] The commonest and cheapest sounds, as the barking of a dog, produce the same effect on fresh and healthy ears that the rarest music does. It depends on your appetite of sound. Just as a crust is sweeter to a healthy appetite than confectionery to a pampered or diseased one. It is better that these cheap sounds be music to us than that we have the rarest ears for music in any other sense.

Style over substance seems to prevail in our time as it did in Thoreau's time. We go to a lecture and expect to be entertained with private thoughts and instead we are fed someone else's thoughts second-hand that we could have better sat home and read directly to more profit.

[page 228] I am disappointed by most essays and lectures. I find that I had expected the authors would have some life, some very private experience, to report, which would make it comparatively unimportant in what style they expressed themselves, but commonly they have only a talent to exhibit.

One can presume that Buffum was not disappointing in his lecture reported below, as he and Thoreau subsequently spent the next couple of days together in the region of Lynn and Nahant.

[page 243] Jan. 13. Go to Lynn to lecture, *via* Cambridge.

4:30 P. M. — At Jonathan Buffum's, Lynn. Lecture in John B. Alley's parlor. Mr. J. Buffum describes to me ancient wolf-traps, made probably by the early settlers in Lynn, perhaps after an Indian model; one some two miles from the shore near Saugus, another more northerly; holes say seven feet deep, about as long, and some three feet wide, stoned up very smoothly, and perhaps converging a little, so that the wolf could not get out. Tradition says that a wolf and a squaw were one morning found in the same hole, staring at each other.

Thoreau often feels melancholy, especially during the cold, drab winter months when natural food is scarce during his walks, but Nature seems ever ready to revive his spirits with one of its many beautiful extravagances. This time on Jan. 6. the miracle of the snowflake touched Thoreau's sleeve and his heart which leads him to wax eloquent, calling up visions of a battle of chariots in the heavens from which these wheels of wonder have descended to the arm of his long coat. Few people today can pause to say as he did, "We are rained and snowed on with gems." That is the function of poets in any age, to pause, notice, and say the things that others in their rush of getting and achieving let pass unnoticed. The very structure of the poet's meter and rhymes are designed to break the fast-paced breathing of the getting and achieving one, to slow down one's breathing and allow beauty to enter one's mind and heart.

[page 238, 240] I was feeling very cheap, nevertheless, reduced to make the most of dry dogwood berries. Very little evidence of God or man did I see just then, and life not as rich and inviting an enterprise as it should be, when my attention was caught by a snowflake on my coat-sleeve. It was one of those perfect, crystalline, star-shaped ones, six-rayed, like a flat wheel with six spokes, only the spokes were perfect little pine trees in shape, arranged around a central spangle. This little object, which, with many of its fellows, rested unmelting on my coat, so perfect and beautiful, reminded me that Nature had not lost her pristine vigor yet, and why should man lose heart? Sometimes the pines were worn and had lost their branches, and again it appeared as if several stars had impinged on one another at various angles, making a somewhat spherical mass. These little wheels came down like the wrecks of chariots from a battle waged in the sky. There were mingled with these starry flakes small downy pellets also. This was at mid-afternoon, and it has not quite ceased snowing yet (at 10 P. M.). We are rained and snowed on with gems. I confess that I was a little encouraged, for I was beginning to believe that Nature was poor and mean, and I was now convinced that she turned off as good work as ever. What a world we live in! Where are the jewelers' shops? There is

nothing handsomer than a snowflake and a dewdrop. I may say that the maker of the world exhausts his skill with each snowflake and dewdrop that he sends down. We think that the one mechanically coheres and that the other simply flows together and falls, but in truth they are the product of *enthusiasm*, the children of an ecstasy, finished with the artist's utmost skill.

In this next passage Thoreau draws an analogy of the white man to the red man, noting the two are dissimilar to each other as the dog is to the fox. One wonders if the dog and the fox were more alike before humans domesticated the dog, but not the fox. And whether the Indian were less like the fox before the white man came to this land.

[page 252, 253] The dog is to the fox as the white man to the red. The former has attained to more clearness in his bark; it is more ringing and musical, more developed; he explodes the vowels of his alphabet better; and beside he has made his place so good in the world that he can run without skulking in the open field. What a smothered, ragged, feeble, and unmusical sound is the bark of the fox! It seems as if he scarcely dared raise his voice lest it should catch the ear of his tame cousin and inveterate foe.

By Jan. 24, Thoreau was upset that there had not been enough snow for sleighing that winter.

[page 254] What is winter without snow and ice in this latitude? The bare earth is unsightly. This winter is but unburied summer.

Next Thoreau compares a squash that weighs about as much of a man to a man and finds that the squash would have as much to say about God as a man might. In the squash-man metaphor we find Thoreau shaping a biting satire of everyman.

[page 261] I raised last summer a squash which weighed 123 ½ pounds. If it had fallen on me it would have made as deep and lasting an impression as most men do. I would just as lief know what it thinks about God as what most men think, or are said to think. In such a squash you have already got the bulk of a man. My man, perchance, when I have put such a question to him, opes his eyes for a moment, essays in vain to think, like a rusty firelock out of order, then calls for a plate of that same squash to eat and goes to sleep. . . .

Every writer, I daresay, has experienced a quickened passage of time as one is writing and composing. Of all the compositions that Shakespeare wrote, we have no direct report as to whether he experienced this phenomenon as he wrote. If all writing is biography, then we might find some passage in Shakespeare which describes this quickened passage of time, but Thoreau's Journal-writing is real-time biography, recorded as it happens.

[page 263] Time never passes so quickly and unaccountably as when I am engaged in composition, *i. e.* in writing down my thoughts. Clocks seem to have been put forward.

Our metaphor of "being stuck in a quagmire" belies the origin of its root *quag* as Thoreau explains it.

[page 272] This is a regular *quag*, or shaking surface, and in this way, evidently, floating islands are formed. I am not sure but that meadow, with all its bushes in it would float a man-of-war.

Spruce tea, after reading Thoreau's description, I think I shall stay away from, perhaps because to me turpentine comes from a can and is associated with paint smells. This passage shows how adventuresome he was with eating and brewing food stuffs he found on his walks. He is talking below of twigs and leaves of spruce.

[page 274] I brought some home and had a cup of tea made, which, in spite of a slightly piny or turpentine flavor, I thought unexpectedly good.

Thoreau uses weird fractions in his measurements, such as talking about a board that is 15 and five-twelfths feet long. That is easy to understand as a twelfth of a foot is an inch, but how can one explain the origin of "three sevenths of an inch" in this next passage?

[page 275] I observed yesterday in that oak stump on the ditch-bank by Trillium Wood (which I counted the rings of once) that between the twentieth and twenty-seventh rings there was only about three sevenths of an inch, though before and after this it grew very fast and seven spaces would make nearly two inches.

My speculation is not that Thoreau had a ruler marked in sevenths of an inch (unlikely), but that he was accustomed to making fractions of readily available portions of the world. The distance of two inches held 7 rings (27-20), he knew this by something he had that was two inches long. Each ring was then two-sevenths of an inch. It would easy to add half a ring to get the length therefore of three-sevenths. One must recall that Thoreau was a surveyor and was used to doing ratios of various odd-sized lengths on the spur of the moment to make measurements for his land plots.

In this next passage, we can note that our common word "canyon" came to us from the Spanish and we have added the "y" to replace the tilde over the "n".

[page 284] Far from here, I see the surface of weeds and mud lifted up in like manner where there is no cañon or rill, but a puddle.

On the coldest day of the winter, Thoreau is at home writing and notes that one who is abroad on such a day deals only with the surfaces of things, that only one who is home can afford to deal with inner things such as feelings and thoughts.

[page 285] Feb. 19 The traveler is defended and calloused. He deals with surfaces, has a greatcoat on. But he who stays at home and writes about homely things give us naked and tender thoughts and sentiments.

When Spring arrives, Thoreau is overjoyed. He notes the rhythmic cadence of the first bird he hears after the long winter, a flicker, and notes that its sound "peoples" the hitherto barren fields and forests of his daily walks.

[page 300] March 17. Ah! there is the note of the first flicker, a prolonged, monotonous wick-wick-wick-wick-wick-wick, etc., or, if you please, quick-quick, heard far over and through the dry leaves. But how that single sound peoples and enriches all the woods and fields! They are no longer the same woods and fields that they were. This note really quickens what was dead. It seems to put a life into withered grass and leaves and bare twigs, and henceforth the days shall not be as they have been.

Thoreau likens the forest being quickened by the flicker to his neighbor's house which comes alive when the family arrives home after being away for a long time. Clearly Thoreau, the solitary bachelor for all his life, lived in a world with as much excitement as parents with a houseful of children.

[page 300, 301] It is as when a family, your neighbors, return to an empty house after a long absence, and you hear the cheerful hum of voices and the laughter of children, and see the smoke from the kitchen fire. The doors are thrown open, and children go screaming through the hall. So the flicker dashes through the aisles of the grove, throws up a window here and cackles out it, and then there, airing the house. It makes its voice ring up-stairs and down-stairs, and so, as it were, fits it for its habitation and ours, and takes possession. It is as good as a housewarming to all nature. Now I hear and see him

louder and nearer on the top of the long-armed white oak, sitting very upright, as is their wont, as it were calling for some of his kind that may also have arrived.

In this next paean to Spring, we spy evidence that Thoreau writes on location. He is looking out from Fair Haven Hill, about two-thirds of the way up. He notices the snow is off the mountains "which seem even to have come again like the birds." The wind is blowing hard enough that he is having trouble writing.

[page 305] The undulating river is a bright-blue channel between sharp-edged shores of ice retained by the willows. The wind blows strong but warm from west by north, so that I have to hold my paper tight when I write this, making the copses creak and roar; but the sharp tinkle of a song sparrow is heard through it all. But ah! the needles of the pine, how they shine, as I look down over the Holden wood and westward! Every third tree is lit with the most subdued but clear ethereal light, as if it were the most delicate frostwork in a winter morning, reflecting no heat, but only light. And as they rock and wave in the strong wind, even a mile off, the light courses up and down there as over a field of grain; *i. e.*, they are alternately light and dark, like looms above the forest, when the shuttle is thrown between the light woof and the dark web, weaving a light article, — spring goods for Nature to wear. At sight of this my spirit is like a lit tree. It runs or flashes over their parallel boughs as when you play with the teeth of it comb. The pine-tops wave like squirrels' tails flashing in the air. Not only osiers but pine-needles, methinks, shine in the spring, and arrowheads and railroad rails, etc., etc. Anacreon noticed the same. Is it not the higher sun, and cleansed air, and greater animation of nature? There is a warmer red to the leaves of the shrub oak, and to the tail of the hawk circling over them.

The gossamer appears to Thoreau in the Spring just as in the Fall. Once again he is unable to locate a spider to explain the unexpected appearance of these cottony threads everywhere.

[page 327] Small cottony films are continually settling down or blown along through the air. Does not this gossamer answer to that of the fall? They must have sprung to with one consent last night or this morning and bent new cables to the clods and stubble all over this part of the world.

Thoreau is equally at home with eagle thoughts as he is with sparrow thoughts as we read in this next passage. He spots a large bird in a distance and watches it as it takes off until he is sure by its very mode of flight that it must be an eagle.

[page 331] It sits there facing me some forty or fifty rods off, pluming itself but keeping a good lookout. At this distance and in this light, it appears to have a rusty-brown head and breast and is white beneath, with rusty leg-feathers and a tail black beneath. When it flies again it is principally black varied with white, regular light spots on its tail and wings beneath, but chiefly a conspicuous white space on the forward part of the back; also some of the upper side of the tail or tail-coverts is white. It has broad, ragged, buzzard-like wings, and from the white of its back, as well as the shape and shortness of its wings and its not having a gull-like body, I think it must be an eagle. It lets itself down with its legs somewhat helplessly dangling, as if feeling for something on the bare meadow, and then gradually flies away, soaring and circling higher and higher until lost in the downy clouds. This lofty soaring is at least a grand recreation, as if it were nourishing sublime ideas. I should like to know why it soars higher and higher so, whether its thoughts are really turned to earth, for it seems to be more nobly as well as highly employed than the laborers ditching in the meadow beneath or any others of my fellow townsmen.

On May 1 Thoreau hears the hum of honey-bees and

that tells him that the silky swamp willow (*Salix sericea*) is in bloom. Note that "humblebee" is another name for the common "bumblebee".

[page 393] The old *Salix sericea* is now alive with the hum of honey-bees. This would show that it is in bloom. I see and hear one humble bee among them, inaugurating summer with his deep bass.

Here is a passage in which Thoreau mentions the nine penny coin which must have been as common in his day as the quarter is to us in 2007, and probably more valuable as it would buy as much as three drinks at a local tavern in his day.

[page 401] Saw and heard the small pewee yesterday. The aspen leaves at Island to-day appear as big as a nine-pence suddenly.

A bricklayer works from sun to sun, but a thinker's work is never done. Pardon the paraphrase of a common saying, but Thoreau has inspired me with this next passage. As a writer myself, I know that the common impression of a writer is some lazy lout who is not good enough for the workday world, someone who lolls around the house and occasionally places a few words on paper and calls it a day. Nothing could be further from the truth, but only those who have held the full-time job of a writer will know this truth. Thoreau did and this is perhaps his finest expression of what it is to be a writer, to undertake the mighty task of bringing a thought into written form on a page.



[page 404, 405] The thinker, he who is serene and self-possessed, is the brave, not the desperate soldier. He who can deal with his thoughts as a material, building them into poems in which future generations will delight, he is the man of the greatest and rarest vigor, not sturdy diggers and lusty polygamists. He is the man of energy, in whom subtle and poetic thoughts are bred. Common men can enjoy partially; they can go a-fishing rainy days; they can *read* poems perchance, but they have not the vigor to beget poems. They can enjoy feebly, but they cannot create. Men talk of freedom! How many are free to think? free from fear, from perturbation, from prejudice? Nine hundred and ninety-nine in a thousand are perfect slaves. How many can exercise the highest human faculties? He is the man truly — courageous, wise, ingenious — who can use his thoughts and ecstasies as the material of fair and durable creations. One man shall derive from the fisherman's story more than the fisher has got who tells it. The mass of men do not know how to cultivate the fields they traverse. The mass glean only a scanty pittance where the thinker reaps an abundant harvest. What is all your building, if you do not build with thoughts? No exercise implies more real manhood and vigor than joining thought to thought. How few men can tell what they have thought! I hardly know half a dozen who are not too lazy for this. They cannot get over some difficulty, and therefore they are on the long way round. You conquer fate by thought. If you think the fatal thought of men and institutions, you need never pull the trigger. The consequences of thinking inevitably follow. There is no more Herculean task than to think a thought about this life and then get it expressed.

One day I drove to a Naval Air Station several miles from where I sit typing today. The Elevation Marker on the Airfield was 1 Foot above sea level. That's about the average elevation hereabouts where I was born and grew up in southern Louisiana. So, why, some people must wonder, do I write for Good Mountain

Press? One woman even wrote to me in care of "Good Morning Press", a name that I have grown fond of since she wrote me. As an adult I lived for a total of nine years collectively in East Tennessee, Southern California, and Massachusetts, all three areas in close proximity to mountains. I loved the mountains and how they lifted my spirits. By the time I returned to my roots at sea level, I had learned to keep that mountain-top and mountain-viewing feeling with me wherever I was. Whenever we have a thunderstorm here, which almost is daily during the summer, the air grows cooler and the area fills all around with ionized air just like on a mountain top. While the storm is still visible from a distance, its thunderhead tops 60,000 feet which makes it the world's tallest mountain. So without moving from my swing at sea level, I can experience both the mountain-top feeling and the mountain-viewing feeling of a distant mountain range. These are my good mountains.

[page 430] May 17. I doubt if in the landscape there can be anything finer than a distant mountain-range. They are a constant elevating influence.

While beginning his ascent of Monadnock mountain on June 2, Thoreau described some of the local plants. I will close this review of an image of the *Geranium Robertianum* which he found at the base of the mountain.

[page 453] Here, at the base, by the course of a rocky rill, where we paused in the shade, in moist ground, I saw the *Tiarella cordifolia*, abundant and apparently in prim, with its white spike sometimes a foot and more high; also the leaves of the *Geranium Robertianum*, emitting their peculiar scent, with the radical reddish tinge, not yet budded.



We will close our walk through the woods with Henry, a decade of years and volumes, with many miles and seasons behind us. Were we alive in Henry's time, he would not have allowed us his company, but one hundred and fifty years of separation, and we are fit company indeed for our intrepid explorer of Concord. He allows us to observe the flora and fauna which he observes, to climb the mountains he climbs, to paddle and float down the rivers in his boat, to reach into pouts' nests with him, to pluck up a handful of coupling frogs, to raise spawn in a firkin with him, to think sparrow thoughts and eagle thoughts with him, to quicken our hearts with his as the flicker quickens the wintry woods back into springy life. Till we meet again in these pages, dear Reader, let me say to you what H. D. T.'s friend R. W. E. said about what a friend is, "We will meet as though we met not, and part as though we parted not."

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----- Footnotes -----

Footnote 1. You cannot break them. If you should slump, 't is to a finer sand. [RJM: This is Thoreau's own words in a footnote of his Journal.]

[Return to text directly before Footnote 1.](#)

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**Footnote 2.** This quotation is from page 79 of [Wild Fruits — Thoreau's Rediscovered Last Manuscript](#). The section on Wild Apples is perhaps the largest in the book, extending from page 74 to 92.

[Return to text directly before Footnote 2.](#)

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Footnote 3. *i. e.* "not bespoke" means "not already arranged for." Sexton is a church official having duties as gravedigger, among other things.

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**Footnote .** I estimate that \$100 thousand in 1858 is equivalent to about \$20 million in 2007.

[Return to text directly before Footnote 4.](#)

