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FICTION

Good News

The Monkey Wrench Gang

Black Sun

Fire on the Mountain

The Brave Cowboy

Jonathan Troy

PERSONAL HISTORY

Abbey's Road

The Journey Home

Desert Solitaire

Beyond the Wall

Down the River

NATURAL HISTORY

Desert Images (with David Muench)

The Hidden Canyon (with John Blaustein)

Cactus Country (with Ernst Haas)

Slickrock (with Philip Hyde)

Appalachian Wilderness (with Eliot Porter)

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Down the River with Henry Thoreau

November 4, 1980

Our river is the Green River in southeast Utah. We load our boats at a place called Mineral Bottom, where prospectors once searched for gold, later for copper, still later for uranium. With little luck. With me are five friends plus the ghost of a sixth: in my ammo can—the river runner's handbag—I carry a worn and greasy paperback copy of a book called *Walden, or Life in the Woods*. Not for thirty years have I looked inside this book; now for the first time since my school days I shall. Thoreau's mind has been haunting mine for most of my life. It seems proper now to reread him. What better place than on this golden river called the Green? In the clear tranquility of November? Through the red rock canyons known as Labyrinth, Stillwater, and Cataract in one of the sweetest, brightest, grandest, and loneliest of primitive regions still remaining in our America?

Questions. Every statement raises more and newer questions. We shall never be done with questioning, so long as men and women remain human. QUESTION AUTHORITY reads a bumper sticker I saw the other day in Moab, Utah. Thoreau would doubtless have amended that to read "Always Question Authority." I would add only the word "All" before the word "Authority." Including, of course, the authority of Henry David himself.

Here we are, slipping away in the early afternoon of another Election Day. A couple of us did vote this morning but we are not, really, good citizens. Voting for the lesser evil on the grounds that otherwise we'd be stuck with the greater evil. Poor grounds for choice, certainly. Losing grounds.

We will not see other humans or learn of the election results for ten days to come. And so we prefer it. We like it that way. What could be older than the news? We shall treasure the bliss of our ignorance for as long as we can. "The man who goes each day to the village to hear the latest news has not heard from himself in a long time." Who said that? Henry, naturally. The arrogant, insolent village crank.

I think of another bumper sticker, one I've seen several times in several places this year: NOBODY FOR PRESIDENT. Amen. The word is getting around. Henry would have approved. Heartily. For he also said, "That government is best which governs not at all."

Year by year the institutions that dominate our lives grow ever bigger, more complicated, massive, impersonal, and powerful. Whether governmental, corporate, military, or technological—and how can any one of these be disentangled from the others?—they weigh on society as the pyramids of Egypt weighed on the backs of those who were conscripted to build them. The pyramids of power. Five thousand years later the people of Egypt still have not recovered. They remain a passive, debased mass of subjects. Mere fellahin, expendable and interchangeable units in a social megamachine. As if the pride and spirit had been crushed from them forever.

In many a clear conclusion we find ourselves anticipated by the hoer of beans on the shores of Walden Pond. "As for the Pyramids," wrote Henry, "there is nothing to wonder at in them so much as the fact that so many men could be found degraded enough to spend their lives constructing a tomb for some ambitious booby, whom it would have been wiser and manlier to have drowned in the Nile. . . ."

Some critic has endeavored to answer this observation by claiming that the pyramid projects provided winter employment for swarms of peasants who might otherwise have been forced to endure long seasons of idleness and hunger. But where did the funds come from, the surplus grain, to support and feed these hundreds of thousands of two-legged pismires? Why, from the

taxes levied on the produce of their *useful* work in the rice fields of the Nile Delta. The slaves were twice exploited. Every year. Just as the moon rides, concrete monuments, and industrial war machines of contemporary empire-states, whether called capitalist or socialist, are funded by compulsory taxation, erected and maintained by what is in effect compulsory labor.

The river flows. The river will not wait. Let's get these boats on the current. Loaded with food, bedrolls, cooking gear—four gourmet cooks in a party of six (plus ghost)—they ride on the water, tethered to shore. Two boats, one an eighteen-foot rubber raft, the other an aluminum dory. Oar-powered. We scramble on board, the swamper untie the lines, the oarsmen heave at their oars. Rennie Russell (author of *On the Loose*) operates the raft; a long-connected, lean fellow named Dusty Teal rows the dory.

We glide down the golden waters of Labyrinth Canyon. The water here is smooth as oil, the current slow. The sandstone walls rise fifteen hundred feet above us, radiant with sunlight, manganese and iron oxides, stained with old tapestries of organic residues left on the rock faces by occasional waterfalls. On shore, wheeling away from us, the stands of willow glow in autumn copper; beyond the willow are the green-gold cottonwoods. Two ravens fly along the rim, talking about us. Henry would like it here.

November 5, 1980

We did not go far yesterday. We rowed and drifted two miles down the river and then made camp for the night on a silt bank at the water's edge. There had been nobody but ourselves at Mineral Bottom but the purpose, nonetheless, was to "get away from the crowd," as Rennie Russell explained. We understood. We cooked our supper by firelight and flashlight, ate beneath the stars. Somebody uncorked a bottle of wine. Rennie played his guitar, his friend Ted Seeley played the fiddle, and Dusty Teal played the mandolin. We all sang. Our music ascended to the sky, echoing softly from the cliffs. The river poured quietly

seaward, making no sound but here and there, now and then, a gurgle of bubbles, a trilling of ripples off the hulls of our half-beached boats.

Sometime during the night a deer stalks nervously past our camp. I hear the noise and, when I get up before daybreak, I see the dainty heart-shaped tracks. I kindle the fire and build the morning's first pot of black, rich, cowboy coffee, and drink in solitude the first cupful, warming my hands around the hot cup. The last stars fade, the sky becomes brighter, passing through the green glow of dawn into the fiery splendor of sunrise.

The others straggle up, one by one, and join me around the fire. We stare at the shining sky, the shining river, the high canyon walls, mostly in silence, until one among us volunteers to begin breakfast. Yes indeed we are a lucky little group. Privileged, no doubt. At ease out here on the edge of nowhere, loafing into the day, enjoying the very best of the luckiest of nations, while around the world billions of other humans are sweating, fighting, striving, procreating, starving. As always, I try hard to feel guilty. Once again I fail.

"If I knew for a certainty that some man was coming to my house with the conscious intention of doing me good," writes our Henry, "I would run for my life."

We Americans cannot save the world. Even Christ failed at that. We Americans have our hands full in trying to save ourselves. And we've barely tried. The Peace Corps was a lovely idea—for idle and idealistic young Americans. Gave them a chance to see a bit of the world, learn something. But as an effort to "improve" the lives of other peoples, the inhabitants of the so-called underdeveloped nations (our nation is overdeveloped), it was an act of cultural arrogance. A piece of insolence. The one thing we could do for a country like Mexico, for example, is to stop every illegal immigrant at the border, give him a good rifle and a case of ammunition, and send him home. Let the Mexicans solve their customary problems in their customary manner.

If this seems a cruel and sneering suggestion, consider the

current working alternative: leaving our borders open to unlimited immigration until—and it won't take long—the social, political, economic life of the United States is reduced to the level of life in Juarez. Guadalajara. Mexico City. San Salvador. Haiti. India. To a common penepain of overcrowding, squalor, misery, oppression, torture, and hate.

What could Henry have said to this supposition? He lived in a relatively spacious America of only 24 million people, of whom one-sixth were slaves. A mere 140 years later we have grown to a population ten times larger, and we are nearly all slaves. We are slaves in the sense that we depend for our daily survival upon an expand-or-expire agro-industrial empire—a crackpot machine—that the specialists cannot comprehend and the managers cannot manage. We are, most of us, dependent and helpless employees.

What would Henry have said? He said, "In wildness is the preservation of the world." He said, somewhere deep in his thirty-nine-volume *Journal*, "I go to my solitary woodland walks as the homesick return to their homes." He said, "It would be better if there were but one inhabitant to a square mile, as where I live." Perhaps he did sense what was coming. His last words, whispered from the deathbed, are reported to us as being "moose . . . Indians . . ."

Looking upriver toward Tidwell Bottom, a half mile away, I see a lone horse grazing on the bunch grass, rice grass, saltbush and sand sage of the river's old floodplain. One horse, unhobbled and untended, thirty miles from the nearest ranch or human habitation, it forages on its own. That horse, I'm thinking, may be the one that got away from me years ago, in another desert place not far from here. Leave it alone. That particular horse has found at least a temporary solution to the question of survival. Survival with honor, I mean, for what other form of survival is worth the trouble? That horse has chosen, or stumbled into, solitude and independence. Let it be. Thoreau defined happiness as "simplicity, independence, magnanimity and trust."

But solitude? Horses are gregarious beasts, like us. This lone

horse on Tidwell Bottom may be paying a high price for its freedom, perhaps in some form of equine madness. A desolation of the soul corresponding to the grand desolation of the landscape that lies beyond these canyon walls.

"I never found the companion that was so companionable as solitude," writes Henry. "To be in company, even with the best, is soon wearisome and dissipating."

Perhaps his ghost will forgive us if we suspect an element of *extra-vagance* in the above statement. Thoreau had a merry time in the writing of *Walden*; it is an exuberant book, crackling with humor, good humor, gaiety, with joy in the power of words and phrases, in ideas and emotions so powerful they tend constantly toward the outermost limit of communicable thought.

"The sun is but a morning star." Ah yes, but what exactly does this mean? There's a great day-a-coming? Could be. But maybe the sun is also an evening star. Maybe the phrase had no exact meaning even in Thoreau's mind. He was, at times, what we today might call a put-on artist. He loved to shock and exasperate; Emerson complains of Henry's "contrariness." The power of Thoreau's assertion lies not in its meaning but in its exhilarating suggestiveness. Like poetry and music, the words imply more than words can make explicit.

Henry was no hermit. Hardly even a recluse. His celebrated cabin at Walden Pond—some of his neighbors called it a "shanty"—was two miles from Concord Common. A half-hour walk from pond to post office. Henry lived in it for only two years and two months. He had frequent human visitors, sometimes too many, he complained, and admitted that his daily ramblings took him almost every day into Concord. When he tired of his own cooking and his own companionship he was always welcome at the Emersons' for a free dinner. Although it seems that he earned his keep there. He worked on and off for years as Emerson's household handyman, repairing and maintaining things that the great Ralph Waldo was too busy or too incompetent to attend to himself. "Emerson," noted Thoreau in a letter, "is too much the gentleman to push a wheelbarrow." When Mrs. Emerson complained that the chickens were scratching up her

flower beds, Henry attached little cloth booties to the chickens' feet. A witty fellow. Better and easier than keeping them fenced in. When Emerson was off on his European lecture tours, Thoreau would look after not only Emerson's house but also Emerson's children and wife.

We shall now discuss the sexual life of Henry David Thoreau.

November 6, 1980

Awaking as usual sometime before the dawn, frost on my beard and sleeping bag, I see four powerful lights standing in a vertical row on the eastern sky. They are Saturn, Jupiter, Mars and, pale crescent on a darkened disc, the old moon. The three great planets seem to be rising from the cusps of the moon. I stare for a long time at this strange, startling apparition, a spectacle I have never before seen in all my years on planet Earth. What does it mean? If ever I've seen a portent in the sky this must be it. Spirit both forms and informs the universe, thought the New England transcendentalists, of whom Thoreau was one; all Nature, they believed, is but symbolic of a greater spiritual reality beyond. And within.

Watching the planets, I stumble about last night's campfire, breaking twigs, filling the coffeepot. I dip waterbuckets in the river; the water chills my hands. I stare long at the beautiful, dimming lights in the sky but can find no meaning there other than the lights' intrinsic beauty. As far as I can perceive, the planets signify nothing but themselves. "Such suchness," as my Zen friends say. And that is all. And that is enough. And that is more than we can make head or tail of.

"Reality is fabulous," said Henry; "be it life or death, we crave nothing but reality." And goes on to describe in precise, accurate, glittering detail the most subtle and minute aspects of life in and about his Walden Pond; the "pulse" of water skaters, for instance, advancing from shore across the surface of the lake. Appearance *is* reality, Thoreau implies; or so it appears to me. I begin to think he outgrew transcendentalism rather early in his career, at about the same time that he was overcoming the in-

fluence of his onetime mentor Emerson; Thoreau and the transcendentalists had little in common—in the long run—but their long noses, as a friend of mine has pointed out.

Scrambled eggs, bacon, green chiles for breakfast, with hot *salsa*, toasted tortillas, and leftover baked potatoes sliced and fried. A gallon or two of coffee, tea and—for me—the usual breakfast beer. Henry would not have approved of this gourmet mandising. To hell with him. I do not approve of his fastidious puritanism. For one who claims to crave nothing but reality, he frets too much about *purity*. Purity, purity, he preaches, in the most unctuous of his many sermons, a chapter of *Walden* called "Higher Laws."

"The wonder is how they, how you and I," he writes, "can live this slimy, beastly life, eating and drinking. . . ." Like Dick Gregory, Thoreau recommends a diet of raw fruits and vegetables; like a Pythagorean, he finds even beans impure, since the flatulence that beans induce disturbs his more ethereal meditations. (He would not agree with most men that "farting is such sweet sorrow.") But confesses at one point to a sudden violent lust for wild woodchuck, devoured raw. No wonder; Henry was probably anemic.

He raised beans not to eat but to sell—his only cash crop. During his lifetime his beans sold better than his books. When a publisher shipped back to Thoreau 706 unsellable copies of his *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers* (the author had himself paid for the printing of the book), Henry noted in his *Journal*, "I now have a library of 900 volumes, over 700 of which I wrote myself."

Although professing disdain for do-gooders, Thoreau once lectured a poor Irish immigrant, a neighbor, on the advisability of changing his ways. "I tried to help him with my experience. . . ." but the Irishman, John Field, was only bewildered by Thoreau's earnest preaching. "Poor John Field!" Thoreau concludes; "I trust he does not read this, unless he will improve by it. . . ."

Nathaniel Hawthorne, who lived in Concord for a time and knew Thoreau, called him "an intolerable bore."

On the subject of sex, as we would expect, Henry betrays a

considerable nervous agitation. "The generative energy, which when we are loose, dissipates and makes us unclean, when we are continent invigorates and inspires us. Chastity is the flowering of man. . . ." (But not of flowers.) "We are conscious of an animal in us, which awakens in proportion as our higher nature slumbers. It is reptile and sensual. . . ." "He is blessed who is assured that the animal is dying out in him day by day. . . ." In a letter to his friend Harrison Blake, Henry writes: "What the essential difference between man and woman is, that they should be thus attracted to one another, no one has satisfactorily answered."

Poor Henry. We are reminded of that line in Whitman (another great American oddball), in which our good gray poet said of women, "They attract with a fierce, undeniable attraction," while the context of the poem makes it clear that Whitman himself found young men and boys much more undeniable.

Poor Thoreau. But he could also write, in the late essay "Walking," "The wildness of the savage is but a faint symbol of the awful ferity with which good men and lovers meet." Ferity—now there's a word. What could it have meant to Thoreau? Our greatest nature lover did not have a loving nature. A woman acquaintance of Henry's said she'd sooner take the arm of an elm tree than that of Thoreau.

Poor Henry David Thoreau. His short (forty-five years), quiet, passionate life apparently held little passion for the opposite sex. His relationship with Emerson's wife Lidian was no more than a long brother-sisterly friendship. Thoreau never married. There is no evidence that he ever enjoyed a mutual love affair with any human, female or otherwise. He once fell in love with and proposed marriage to a young woman by the name of Ellen Sewall; she rejected him, bluntly and coldly. He tried once more with a girl named Mary Russell; she turned him down. For a young man of Thoreau's hypersensitive character, these must have been cruel, perhaps disabling blows to what little male ego and confidence he possessed to begin with. It left him shattered, we may assume, on that side of life; he never again approached a woman with romantic intentions on his mind. He became a pro-

fessional bachelor, scornful of wives and marriage. He lived and probably died a virgin, pure as shrunen snow. Except for those sensual repiles coiling and uncoiling down in the root cellar of his being. Ah, purity!

But we make too much of this kind of thing nowadays. Modern men and women are obsessed with the sexual; it is the only realm of primordial adventure still left to most of us. Like apes in a zoo, we spend our energies on the one field of play remaining; human lives otherwise are pretty well caged in by the walls, bars, chains, and iron gridwork of our industrial culture. In the relatively wild, free America of Henry's time there was plenty of opportunity for every kind of adventure, although Henry himself did not, it seems to me, take advantage of those opportunities. (He could have toured the Western plains with George Catlin!) He led an unnecessarily constrained existence, and not only in the "generative" region.

Thoreau the spinster-poet. In the year 1850, when Henry reached the age of thirty-three, Emily Dickinson in nearby Amherst became twenty. Somebody should have brought the two together. They might have hit it off. I imagine this scene, however, immediately following the honeymoon:

EMILY (raising her pen)

Henry, you haven't taken out the garbage.

HENRY (raising his flute)

Take it out yourself.

What tunes did Thoreau play on that flute of his? He never tells us; we would like to know. And what difference would a marriage—with a woman—have made in Henry's life? In his work? In that message to the world by which he challenges us, as do all the greatest writers, to change our lives? He taunts, he sermonizes, he condemns, he propounds conundrums, he orates and exhorts us:

"Wherever a man goes, men will pursue and paw him with their dirty institutions. . . ."

"I found that by working six weeks a year I could meet all the expenses of living."

"Tell those who worry about their health that they may be already dead."

"When thousands are thrown out of employment, it suggests they were not well-employed."

"If you stand right fronting and face to face with a fact, you will see the sun glimmer on both its surfaces, as if it were a scimitar, and feel its sweet edge dividing you through the heart and marrow, and so you will happily conclude your mortal career."

"... The hero is commonly the simplest and obscurest of men."

"Little is to be expected of a nation when the vegetable mould is exhausted, and it is compelled to make manure of the bones of its fathers."

"Genius is a light which makes the darkness visible, like the lightning's flash, which perchance shatters the temple of knowledge itself...."

"When, in the course of ages, American liberty has become a fiction of the past—as it is to some extent a fiction of the present—the poets of the world will be inspired by American mythology."

"We should go forth on the shortest walk . . . in the spirit of undying adventure, never to return."

"... If I repent of anything, it is very likely to be my good behavior. What demon possessed me that I behaved so well?"

"No man is so poor that he need sit on a pumpkin; that is shiftlessness."

"I would rather sit on a pumpkin and have it all to myself than be crowded on a velvet cushion."

"A man is rich in proportion to the number of things which he can afford to let alone."

"We live meanly, like ants, though the fable tells us that we were long ago changed into men...."

"A living dog is better than a dead lion. Shall a man go and hang himself because he belongs to the race of pygmies, and not be the biggest pygmy that he can?"

"I will endeavor to speak a good word for the truth."

"Rather than love, than money, than fame, give me truth."

"Any truth is better than make-believe."

And so forth.

November 7, 1980

On down this here Greenish river. We cast off, row south past Woodruff, Point, and Saddlehorse bottoms, past Upheaval Bottom and Hardscrabble Bottom. Wherever the river makes a bend—and this river comes near, in places, to bowknots—there is another flat area, a bottom, covered with silt, sand, gravel, grown up with grass and brush and cactus and, near shore, trees: willow, cottonwood, box elder, and jungles of tamarisk.

The tamarisk does not belong here, has become a pest, a water-loving exotic engaged in the process of driving out the cottonwoods and willows. A native of arid North Africa, the tamarisk was imported to the American Southwest fifty years ago by conservation *experts*—dirt management specialists—in hopes that it would help prevent streambank erosion. The cause of the erosion was flooding, and the primary cause of the flooding, then as now, was livestock grazing.

Oars at rest, we drift for a while. The Riverine String Band take up their instruments and play. The antique, rowdy, vibrant music from England and Ireland by way of Appalachia and the Rocky Mountains floats on the air, rises like smoke toward the high rimrock of the canyon walls, fades by infinitesimal gradations into the stillness of eternity. Where else could it go?

Ted Seeley prolongs the pause, then fills the silence with a solo on the fiddle, a Canadian invention called "Screechin' Old Woman and Growlin' Old Man." This dialogue continues for some time, concluding with a triumphant outburst from the Old Woman.

We miss the landing off the inside channel at Wild Horse Bench and have to fight our way through thickets of tamarisk

and came to the open ground of Fort Bottom. We make lunch on crackers, canned tuna, and chopped black olives in the shade of a cottonwood by the side of a long-abandoned log cabin. A trapper, prospector, or cow thief might have lived here—or all three of them—a century ago. Names and initials adorn the lintel of the doorway. The roof is open to the sky.

We climb a hill of clay and shale and limestone ledges to inspect at close hand an ancient ruin of stone on the summit. An Anasazi structure, probably seven or eight hundred years old, it commands a broad view of river and canyon for many miles both up and downstream, and offers a glimpse of the higher lands beyond. We can see the great Buttes of the Cross, Candlestick Tower, Junction Butte (where the Green River meets the Colorado River), Ekker Butte, Grandview Point, North Point, and parts of the White Rim. Nobody human lives at those places, or in the leagues of monolithic stone between them. We find pleasure in that knowledge. From this vantage point everything looks about the same as it did when Major John Wesley Powell and his mates first saw it in 1869. Photographs made by members of his party demonstrate that nothing much has changed except the vegetation types along the river, as in the case of tamarisk replacing willow.

We return to our river. A magisterial magpie sails before us across the barren fields. Two ravens and a hawk watch our lazy procession downstream past the long straightaway of Potato Bottom. We make camp before sundown on an island of white sand in the middle of the river. A driftwood fire under an iron pot cooks our vegetable stew. Russell mixes a batch of heavy-duty cornbread in the Dutch oven, sets the oven on the hot coals, and piles more coals on the rimmed lid. The cornbread bakes. We drink our beer, sip our rum, and listen to a pack of coyotes yammering like idiots away off in the twilight.

"I wonder who won the election," says one member of our party—our boatwoman Lorna Corson.

"The coyotes can explain everything," says Rennie Russell.

It's going to be a cold and frosty night. We add wood to the

fire and put on sweaters and coats. The nights are long in November; darkness by six. The challenge is to keep the fire going and conversation and music alive until a decent bedtime arrives. Ten hours is too long to spend curled in a sleeping bag. The body knows this if the brain does not. That must be why I wake up every morning long before the sun appears. And why I remain sitting here, alone on my log, after the others have crept away, one by one, to their scattered beds.

Henry gazes at me through the flames of the campfire. From beyond the veil. Edward, he says, what are you doing here? Henry, I reply, what are you doing out there?

How easy for Thoreau to preach simplicity, asceticism and voluntary poverty when, as some think, he had none but himself to care for during his forty-five years. How easy to work part-time for a living when you have neither wife nor children to support. (When you have no payments to meet on house, car, pickup truck, cabin cruiser, life insurance, medical insurance, summer place, college educations, dinette set, color TVs, athletic club, real estate investments, holidays in Europe and the Caribbean....)

Why Henry never took a wife has probably more to do with his own eccentric personality than with his doctrine of independence-through-simplicity. But if he had *wanted* a partner, and had been able to find one willing to share his doctrine, then it seems reasonable to suppose that the two of them—with their little Thoreaus—could have managed to live a family life on Thoreauvian principles. Henry might have been compelled to make pencils, survey woodlots, and give public lectures for twenty-four weeks, rather than only six each year, but his integrity as a free man would still have been preserved. There is no reason—other than the comic incongruity of imagining Henry Thoreau as husband and father—to suppose that his bachelorhood invalidates his arguments. If there was tragedy in the life of Thoreau, that tragedy lies not in any theoretical contradiction between what Henry advocated and how he lived but in his basic loneliness. He was a psychic loner all his life.

But a family man nevertheless. Except for his two years and two months at Walden Pond, his student years at Harvard, and occasional excursions to Canada, Cape Cod, and Maine, Thoreau lived most of his life in and upon the bosom of family—Emerson's family, part of the time, and the Thoreau family—mother, sister, uncles, and aunts—during the remainder.

When his father died Henry took over the management of the family's pencil-making business, a cottage industry carried on in the family home. Always a clever fellow with his hands, Henry developed a better way of manufacturing pencils and a better product. Some think that the onset of his tuberculosis, which eventually killed him, was hastened by the atmosphere of fine powdered graphite in which he earned a part of his keep.

A part of it: Thoreau had no wish to become a businessman—"Trade curses everything it handles"—and never gave to pencils more than a small part of his time.

He was considered an excellent surveyor by his townsmen and his services were much in demand. His work still serves as the basis of many property lines in and around the city of Concord. There is a document in the Morgan Library in New York, a map of Walden Pond, signed "H. D. Thoreau, Civil Engineer."

But as with pencil-making, so with surveying—Thoreau would not allow it to become a full-time career. Whatever he did, he did well; he was an expert craftsman in everything to which he put his hand. But to no wage-earning occupation would he give his life. He had, he said, "other business." And this other business awaited him out in the woods, where, as he wrote, "I was better known."

What was this other business? It is the subject of *Walden*, of his further books and essays, and of the thirty-nine volumes of his *Journal*, from which, to a considerable extent, the books were quarried. Thoreau's subject is the greatest available to any writer, thinker and human being, one which I cannot summarize in any but the most banal of phrases: "meaning," or "the meaning of life" (meaning *all* life, of course, not human life only), or in the technical usage preferred by professional philosophers, "the significance of existence."

It is this attempt to encircle with words the essence of being itself—with or without a capital *B*—which gives to Henry's prose-poetry the disturbing, haunting, heart-opening quality that some call mysticism. Like the most ambitious poets and artists, he was trying to get it all into his work, whatever "it" may signify, whatever "all" may include. Living a life full of wonder—wonderful—Henry tries to impart that wonder to his readers.

"There is nothing inorganic. . . . The earth is not a mere fragment of dead history, stratum upon stratum, like the leaves of a book, to be studied by geologists and antiquaries chiefly, but living poetry like the leaves of a tree, which precede flowers and fruit; not a fossil earth but a living earth. . . ."

That the earth, considered whole, is a kind of living being, might well seem like nonsense to the hardheaded among us. Worse than nonsense—mystical nonsense. But let us remember that a hard head, like any dense-hulled and thick-shelled nut, can enclose, out of necessity, only a tiny kernel of meat. Thinking meat, in this case. The hard head reveals, therefore, while attempting to conceal and shelter, its tiny, soft, delicate, and suspicious mind.

The statement about earth is clear enough. And probably true. To some, self-evident, though not empirically verifiable within the present limitations of scientific method. Such verification requires a more sophisticated science than we possess at present. It requires a science with room for more than data and information, a science that includes sympathy for the object under study, and more than sympathy, love. A love based on prolonged contact and interaction. Intercourse, if possible. Observation informed by sympathy, love, intuition. Numbers, charts, diagrams, and formulas are not in themselves sufficient. The face of science as currently construed is a face that only a mathematician could love. The root meaning of "science" is "knowledge"; to see and to see truly, a qualitative, not merely quantitative, understanding.

For an example of science in the whole and wholesome sense read Thoreau's description of an owl's behavior in "Winter Visitors." Thoreau observes the living animal in its native

habitat, and watches it for weeks. For an example of science in its debased sense take this: According to the *L.A. Times*, a psychologist in Los Angeles defends laboratory experimentation on captive dogs with the assertion that "little is known about the psychology of dogs." Anyone who has ever kept a dog knows more about dogs than that psychologist—who doubtless considers himself a legitimate scientist—will learn in a year of Sundays.

Or this: Researchers in San Francisco have confined chimpanzees in airtight glass cubicles (gas chambers) in order to study the effect of various dosages of chemically polluted air on these "manlike organisms." As if there were not already available five million human inhabitants of the Los Angeles basin, and a hundred other places, ready, willing, and eager to supply personally informed testimony on the subject under scrutiny. Leaving aside any consideration of ethics, morality, and justice, there are more intelligent ways to study living creatures. Or nonliving creations: rocks have rights too.

That which today calls itself science gives us more and more information, an indigestible glut of information, and less and less understanding. Thoreau was well aware of this tendency and foresaw its fatal consequences. He could see the tendency in himself, even as he partially succumbed to it. Many of the later *Journals* are filled with little but the enumeration of statistical data concerning such local Concord phenomena as the rise and fall of lake levels, or the thickness of the ice on Flint's Pond on a January morning. Tedious reading—pages and pages of "factoids," as Norman Mailer would call them—attached to no coherent theory, illuminated by neither insight nor outlook nor speculation.

Henry may have had a long-range purpose in mind but he did not live long enough to fulfill it. Kneeling in the snow on a winter's day to count the tree rings in a stump, he caught the cold that led to his death on May 6, 1862. He succumbed not partially but finally to facticity.

Why'd you do it, Henry? I ask him through the flames.
The bearded face with the large, soft, dark eyes, mournful

and thoughtful as the face of Lincoln, smiles back at me but offers no answer. He evades the question by suggesting other questions in his better-known "mystical" vein:

"There was a dead horse in the hollow by the path to my house, which compelled me sometimes to go out of my way, especially in the night when the air was heavy, but the assurance it gave me of the strong appetite and inviolable health of Nature was my compensation for this. I love to see that Nature is so rife with life that myriads can be afforded to be sacrificed and suffered to prey on one another. . . . The impression made on a wise man is that of universal innocence. Compassion is a very untenable ground. It must be expeditious. Its pleadings will not bear to be stereotyped."

Henry, I say, what the devil do you mean? You sound like Darwin.

He smiles again and says, "I observed a very small and graceful hawk, like a nighthawk, alternately soaring like a ripple and tumbling a rod or two over and over, showing the underside of its wings, which gleamed like a satin ribbon in the sun. . . . The merlin it seemed to me it might be called; but I care not for its name. It was the most ethereal flight I have ever witnessed. It did not simply flutter like a butterfly, nor soar like the larger hawks, but it sported with proud reliance in the fields of the air. . . . It appeared to have no companion in the universe. . . . and to need none but the morning and the ether with which it played. It was not lonely, but made all the earth lonely beneath it."

Very pretty, Henry. Are you speaking for yourself? I watch his lined, gentle face, the face of his middle age (though he had no later) as recorded in photographs, and cannot help but read there the expression, engraved, of a patient, melancholy resignation. All babies look identical; boys and adolescents resemble one another, in their bewildered hopefulness, more than they differ. But eventually the inner nature of the man appears on his outer surface. Character begins to shine through. Year by year a man reveals himself, while those with nothing to show, show it.

Differentiation becomes individuation. By the age of forty, if not before, a man is responsible for his face. The same is true of women too, certainly, although women, obeying the biological imperative, strive harder than men to preserve an appearance of youthfulness—the reproductive look—and lose it sooner. Appearance is reality.

Henry replies not to my question but, as befits a ghostly seer, to my thought: "Nothing can rightly compel a simple and brave man to a vulgar sadness."

We'll go along with that, Henry; you've been accused of many things but no one, to my knowledge, has yet accused you of vulgarity. Though Emerson, reacting to your night in jail for refusing to pay the poll tax, called the gesture "mean and skulking and in bad taste." In bad taste! How typically Emersonian. Robert Louis Stevenson too called you a "skulker" on the grounds that you preached more strongly than you practiced, later recanting when he learned of your activity in the antislavery movement. The contemporary author Alan Harrington, in his book *The Immortalist*, accuses you of writing, at times, like "an accountant of the spirit." That charge he bases on your vague remarks concerning immortality, and on such lines as "Goodness is the only investment that never fails."

Still other current critics, taking their cue from those whom Nabokov specified as "the Viennese quacks," would deflect the force of your attacks on custom, organized religion, and the state by suggesting that you suffered from a complex of complexes, naturally including the castration complex and the Oedipus complex. Your defiance of authority, they maintain, was in reality no more than the rebelliousness of an adolescent rejecting his father—in this case the meek and mousy John Thoreau.

Whatever grain of truth may be in this diagnosis, such criticism betrays the paternalistic condescension of these critics toward human beings in general. The good citizen, they seem to be saying, is like the obedient child; the rebellious man is a bad boy. "The people are like children," said our own beloved, gone but not forgotten, Richard Nixon. The psychiatric approach to

disidence has been most logically applied in the Soviet Union, where opposition to the state is regarded and treated as a form of mental illness.

In any case, Henry cannot be compelled to confess to a vulgar sadness. The vulgarity resides in the tactics of literary Freudianism. Of the opposition. Psychoanalysis is the neurosis of the psychoanalyst—and of the psychoanalytic critic. Why should we bother any more with this garbage? I thought we stopped talking about Freud back in 1952. Sometime near the end of the Studebaker era.

Fading beyond the last flames of the fire, Henry lulls me to sleep with one of his more soporific homilies:

"The light which puts out our eyes is darkness to us. Only that day dawns to which we are awake. There is more day to dawn. The sun . . ."

Yes, yes, Henry, we know. How true. Whatever it means. How late it is. Whatever the hour.

I rise from my log; heap the coals of the fire together, and by their glimmering light and the cold light of the stars fumble my way back and into the luxury of my goosedown nest. Staring up at mighty Orion, trying to count six of the seven Pleiades, a solemn thought comes to me: We Are Not Alone.

I nuzzle my companion's cold nose, the only part of her not burrowed deep in her sleeping bag. She stirs and half opens her eyes. We're not alone, I whisper in her ear. I know, she says; shut up and go to sleep. Smiling, I face the black sky and the sapphire stars. Mark Twain was right. Better the savage wasteland with Eve than Paradise without her. Where she is, there is Paradise.

Poor Henry:

And then I hear that voice again, far off but clear: "All Nature is my bride."

November 8, 1980

Who won the election? What election? Mere vapors on the gelid air, like the breath from my lungs. I rebuild the fire on the embers of last night's fire. I construct the coffee, adding fresh

grounds to yesterday's. One by one, five human forms reassemble themselves about me, repeating themselves, with minor variations, for another golden day. The two vegetarians in our group—Rennie and Lorna—prepare their breakfast oatmeal, a viscous gray slime. I dump two pounds of Buck-sliced bacon into the expedition's wok, to the horror of the vegetarians, and stir it roughly about with a fork. Stir-cooking. The four carnivores looking on with hungry eyes. The vegetarians smile in pity. "Pig meat," says Lorna, "for the four fat pork faces." "Eat your pussy food," says Dusty Teal, "and be quiet."

The melody of morning. Black-throated desert sparrows chatter in the willows: *chirr . . . chirr . . . chi chi chi*. The sun comes up, a glaring cymbal, over yonder canyon rim. Quickly the temperature rises five, ten, twenty degrees, at the rate of a degree a minute, from freezing to fifty-two. Or so it feels. We peel off parkas, sweaters, shirts, thermal underwear. Ravens croak, a rock falls, the river flows.

The fluvial life. The alluvial shore. "A river is superior to a lake," writes Henry in his *Journal*, "in its liberating influence. It has motion and indefinite length. . . . With its rapid current it is a slightly fluttering wing. River towns are winged towns."

Down the river. Lorna rows the dory, I row the raft. We are entertained by water music from our string trio, a rich enchanting tune out of Peru called "Urubamba." The song goes on and on and never long enough. The Indians must have composed it for a journey down the Amazon.

Fresh slides appear on the mud banks; a beaver plops into the water ahead of us, disappears. The beaver are making a comeback on the Green. Time for D. Julien, Jim Bridgert, Joe Meek, Jed Smith, and Jim Beckwourth to reappear. Eternal recurrence, announced Nietzsche. Time for the mountain men to return. The American West has not given us, so far, sufficient men to match our mountains. Or not since the death of Crazy Horse, Sitting Bull, Dull Knife, Red Cloud, Chief Joseph, Little Wolf, Red Shirt, Gall, Geronimo, Cochise, Tenaya (to name but a few), and their comrades. With their defeat died a bold, brave,

heroic way of life, one as fine as anything recorded history has to show us. Speaking for myself, I'd sooner have been a liver-eating, savage horseman riding with Red Cloud than a slave-owning sophist sipping tempered wine in Periclean Athens. For example. Even Attila the Hun, known locally as the Scourge of God, brought more fresh air and freedom into Europe than the crowd who gave us the syllogism and geometry, Aristotle and his *Categories*, Plato and his *Lysis*.

Instead of mountain men we are cursed with a plague of diggers, drillers, borers, grubbers, of asphalt-spreaders, dam-builders, overgrazers, clear-cutters, and strip-miners whose object seems to be to make our mountains match our men—making molehills out of mountains for a race of rodents—for the rat race.

Oh well . . . revenge is on the way. We see it in those high thin clouds far on the northern sky. We feel it in those rumbles of discontent deep in the cupboards of the earth: tectonic crockery trembling on the continental shelves. We hear it down the slipface of the dunes, a blue wind moaning out of nowhere. We smell it on the air: the smell of danger. Death before dishonor? That's right. What else? Liberty or death? Naturally.

When no one else would do it, it was Thoreau, Henry Thoreau the intolerable bore, the mean skulker, the "quaint stump figure of a man," as William Dean Howells saw him, who rang the Concord firebell to summon the villagers to a speech by Emerson attacking slavery. And when John Brown stood on trial for his life, when all America, even the most ardent abolitionists, was denouncing him, it was himself—Henry—who delivered a public address first in Concord, then in Boston, not only defending but praising, even eulogizing, the "madman" of Harpers Ferry.

We go on. Sheer rock—the White Rim—rises from the river's left shore. We pause at noon to fill our water jugs from a series of potholes half filled with last week's rainwater. We drink, and sitting in the sunlight on the pale sandstone, make our lunch—slabs of dark bread, quite authentic, from a bohemian bakery in

Moab; a serious hard-core hippie peanut butter, heavy as wet concrete, from some bearnik food co-op in Durango, Colorado (where Teal and Corson live); raspberry jam; and wild honey, thick as axle grease, for esophageal lubrication.

"What is your favorite dish?" another guest asked Thoreau as they sat down to a sumptuous Emersonian dinner.

"The nearest," Henry replied.

"At Harvard they teach all branches of learning," said Ralph Waldo.

"But none of the roots," said Henry. Refusing to pay a dollar for his Harvard diploma, he said, "Let every sheep keep its own skin." When objections were raised to his habit of exaggeration, Henry said, "You must speak loud to those who are hard of hearing." Asked to write for the *Ladies' Companion*, he declined on the grounds that he "could not write anything companionable." He defines a pearl as "the hardened tear of a diseased clam, murdered in its old age." Describing the flavor of a certain wild apple, he wrote that it was "sour enough to set a squirrel's teeth on edge, or make a jay scream." On the art of writing he said to a correspondent, "You must work very long to write short sentences." And added that "the one great rule of composition . . . is to speak the truth."

And so on. The man composed wisecracks and epigrams even on his deathbed. "Henry, have you made your peace with God?" asked a relative. "I am not aware that we had ever quarreled, Aunt," said Henry. To another visitor, attempting to arouse in him a decent Christian concern with the next world, Henry said, "One world at a time."

One could make a book of Henry's sayings. And call it *Essays Areopagitica. Walden*.

Many of his friends, neighbors, relatives, and relative friends must have sighed in relief when Henry finally croaked his last, mumbling "moose . . . Indians . . ." and was safely buried under Concord sod. Peace, they thought, at long last. But, to paraphrase the corpse, they had *somewhat hastily* concluded that he was dead.

His passing did not go unnoticed outside of Concord. Thoreau had achieved regional notoriety by 1862. But at the time when the giants of New England literature were thought to be Emerson, Hawthorne, Alcott, Channing, Irving, Longfellow, Dr. Lowell and Dr. Holmes, Thoreau was but a minor writer. Not even a major minor writer.

Today we see it differently. In the ultimate democracy of time, Henry has outlived his contemporaries. Hawthorne and Emerson are still read, at least in university English departments, and it may be that in a few elementary schools up in Maine and Minnesota children are being compelled to read Longfellow's *Hiawatha* (I doubt it; doubt that they can, even under compulsion), but as for the others they are forgotten by everyone but specialists in American literature. Thoreau, however, becomes more significant with each passing decade. The deeper our United States sinks into industrialism, urbanism, militarism—with the rest of the world doing its best to emulate America—the more poignant, strong, and appealing becomes Thoreau's demand for the right of every man, every woman, every child, every dog, every tree, every snail darter, every lousewort, every living thing, to live its own life in its own way at its own pace in its own square mile of home. Or in its own stretch of river.

Looking at my water-soaked, beer-stained, grease-spotted cheap paperback copy of *Walden*, I see that mine was from the thirty-third printing. And this is only one of at least a dozen current American editions of the book. *Walden* has been published abroad in every country where English can be read, as in India—God knows they need it there—or can be translated, as in Russia, where they need it even more. The Kremlin's commissars of literature have classified Thoreau as a nineteenth-century social reformer, proving once again that censors can read but seldom understand.

The village crank becomes a world figure. As his own Johnny Appleseed, he sows the seeds of liberty around the planet, even on what looks like the most unpromising soil. Out of Concord, apples of discord. Truth is the enemy of power, now and always.

We walk up a small side canyon toward an area called Soda Springs Basin; the canyon branches and branches again, forming more canyons. The floor of each is flood-leveled sand, the walls perpendicular sandstone. Each canyon resembles a winding corridor in a labyrinth. We listen for the breathing of the Minotaur but find only cottonwoods glowing green and gold against the red rock, rabbitbrush with its mustard-yellow bloom, mule-ear sunflowers facing the sunlight, their coarse petals the color of butter, and the skull and curled horns of a desert bighorn ram, half buried in the auburn sand.

The canyons go on and on, twisting for miles into the plateau beyond. We turn back without reaching Soda Springs. On our return Dusty Teal takes up the bighorn trophy, carries it back to the dory and mounts it on the bow, giving his boat dignity, class, a Nordic and warlike glamour.

We camp today at Anderson Bottom, across the river from Unknown Bottom. We find photographs and petroglyphs here, pictures of deer, bighorns, warriors, and spectral figures representing—who knows—gods, spirits, demons. They do not trouble us. We cook our dinner and sing our songs and go to sleep.

November 9, 1980

Early in the morning I hear coyotes singing again, calling up the sun. There's something about the coyotes that reminds me of Henry. What is it? After a moment the answer comes.

Down near Tucson, Arizona, where I sometimes live—a grim and grimy little-big town, swarming with nervous policemen, and dope dealers, resolute rapists, and geriatric bank robbers, but let this pass for the moment—the suburban parts of the city are infested with pet dogs. Every home owner in these precincts believes that he needs whatever burglar protection he can get; and he is correct. Most evenings at twilight the wild coyotes come stealing in from the desert to penetrate the suburbs, raid garbage cans, catch and eat a few cats, dogs, and other domesticated

beasts. When this occurs the dogs raise a grim clamor, roaring like maniacs, and launch themselves in hot but tentative pursuit of the coyotes. The coyotes retreat into the brush and cactus, where they stop, facing the town, to wait and sit and laugh at the dogs. They yip, yap, yelp, howl and holler, teasing the dogs, taunting them, enticing them with the old-time call of the wild. And the dogs stand and tremble, shaking with indecision, furious, hating themselves, tempted to join the coyotes, run off with them into the hills, but—afraid. Afraid to give up the comfort, security, and safety of their housebound existence. Afraid of the unknown and dangerous.

Thoreau was our suburban coyote. Town dwellers have always found him exasperating.

"I have traveled a good deal in Concord; and everywhere, in shops and offices and fields, the inhabitants have appeared to me to be doing penance in a thousand remarkable ways. . . . By a seeming fate, commonly called necessity, they are employed, as it says in an old book, laying up treasures which moth and rust will corrupt and thieves break through and steal. It is a fool's life, as they will find when they get to the end of it, if not before. . . . I sometimes wonder that we can be so frivolous. . . . As if you could kill time without injuring eternity."

Oh, come now, Henry, stop yapping at us. Go make love to a pine tree (all Nature being your bride). Lay off. Leave us alone. But he will not stop.

"The mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation. What is called resignation is confirmed desperation. . . . A stereotyped but unconscious despair is concealed even under what are called the games and amusements of mankind. There is no play in them."

But is it *true* that the mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation? And if so, did Henry escape such desperation himself? And who, if anyone, can answer these questions?

As many have noted, the mass of men—and women—lead lives today of *unquiet* desperation. A frantic busyness ("business") pervades our society wherever we look—in city and coun-

try, among young and old and middle-aged, married and unmarried, all races, classes, sexes, in work and play, in religion, the arts, the sciences, and perhaps most conspicuously in the self-conscious cult of meditation, retreat, withdrawal. The symptoms of universal unease and dis-ease are apparent on every side. We hear the demand by conventional economists for increased "productivity," for example. Productivity of what? for whose benefit? to what end? by what means and at what cost? Those questions are not considered. We are belabored by the insistence on the part of our politicians, businessmen and military leaders, and the claque of scribes who serve them, that "growth" and "power" are intrinsic goods, of which we can never have enough, or even too much. As if gigantism were an end in itself. As if a commendable rat were a rat twelve hands high at the shoulders—and still growing. As if we could never have peace on this planet until one state dominates all others.

The secondary symptoms show up in the lives of individuals, the banalities of everyday soap opera: crime, divorce, runaway children, loneliness, alcoholism, mental breakdown. We live in a society where suicide (in its many forms) appears to more and more as a sensible solution; as a viable alternative; as a workable option.

Yes, there are many who seem to be happy in their lives and work. But strange lives, queer work. Space technicians, for example, busily refining a new type of inertial guidance system for an intercontinental ballistic missile bearing hydrogen bombs. Laboratory biologists testing the ability of mice, dogs, and chimpanzees to cultivate cancer on a diet of cigarettes and Holsum bread, to propel a treadmill under electric stimuli, to survive zero gravity in a centrifuge. And the absurd R. Buckminster Fuller hurtling himself around the globe by supersonic jet with six wristwatches strapped to each forearm, each watch set to a different time zone. "The world is big," says Fuller, "but it is comprehensible." Why indeed so it is, when you take myopia for utopia, travel in a tin tube, and think the Astrodome is home.

And also, to be fair, young dancers in a classroom; an old

sculptor hacking in fury at a block of apple wood; a pinto bean farmer in Cortez, Colorado surveying his fields with satisfaction on a rainy day in July (those rare farmers, whom Thoreau dismissed with such contempt, we now regard with envy); a solitary fly fisherman unzipping his fly on the banks of the Madison River; wet children playing on a shining, sun-dazzled beach.

Compared with ours, Thoreau's was an open, quiet, agrarian society, relatively clean and uncluttered. The factory system was only getting under way in his time, though he took note of it when he remarked that "the shop girls have no privacy, even in their thoughts." In his day England, not America, was "the workhouse of the world." (America now in the process of being succeeded by Japan.) What would Henry think of New England, of the United States, of the Western world, in the year 1980? 1984? 2001? Would he not assert, confidently as before, that the mass of humans continue to lead lives of quiet desperation?

Quiet desperation. The bite of the phrase comes from the unexpected, incongruous juxtaposition of ordinarily antithetical words. The power of it comes from our sense of its illuminating force—"a light which makes the darkness visible." Henry's shocking pronouncement continues to resonate in our minds, with deeper vibrations, 130 years after he made it. He allows for exceptions, indicating the "mass of men," not all men, but as for the truth of his observation no Gallup Poll can tell us; each must look into his own heart and mind and then deny it if he can.

And what about Henry himself? When one of his friends, William Ellery Channing, declared morosely that no man could be happy "under present conditions," Thoreau replied without hesitation, "But I am." He spent nearly a year at his dying and near the end, too weak to write any more, he dictated the following, in answer to a letter from his friend Blake:

"You ask particularly after my health. I *suppose* that I have not many months to live; but of course I know nothing about it. I may add that I am enjoying existence as much as ever, and regret nothing."

When the town jailer, Sam Staples, the same who had locked

Thoreau up for a night many years before, and had also become a friend, paid a visit to the dying man, he reported to Emerson: "Never spent an hour with more satisfaction. Never saw a man dying with so much pleasure and peace." A trifle lugubrious, but revealing. Henry's sister Sophia wrote, near his end, "It is not possible to be sad in his presence. No shadow attaches to anything connected with my precious brother. His whole life impresses me as a grand miracle. . . ."

A cheerful stoic all the way, Thoreau refused any drugs to ease the pain or let him sleep; he rejected opiates, according to Channing, "on the ground that he preferred to endure the worst sufferings with a clear mind rather than sink into a narcotic dream." As he would never admit to a vulgar sadness, so he would not allow himself to surrender to mere physical pain.

It must have seemed to Henry during his last year that his life as an author had been a failure. Only two of his books were published during his lifetime and neither received much recognition. His contemporaries without exception—Emerson included—had consigned him to oblivion, and Henry could not have been unaware of the general opinion. But even in this he refused to acknowledge defeat. Noting the dismal sales of his books, he wrote in his *Journal*: "I believe that the result is more inspiring and better for me than if thousands had bought my wares. It affects my privacy less and leaves me freer."

Emerson declared that Thoreau was a coldly unemotional man, stoical but never cheerful; Emerson had so convinced himself of this that when, in editing some of Thoreau's letters for publication, he came across passages that indicated otherwise, he deleted them. But Ralph Waldo's son Edward, in his book *Henry Thoreau as Remembered by a Young Friend*, wrote that Henry loved to sing and dance, and was always popular with the children of Concord, whom he often led on berry-picking parties into the woods. ("Oh I got my thrill . . . on Blueberry Hill. . . .")

In her *Memoirs of Hawthorne*, Hawthorne's daughter Rose gives us this picture of Thoreau ice skating, with Emerson and Hawthorne, on the frozen Concord River: "Hawthorne," she

writes, "moved like a self-impelled Greek statue, stately and grave" (the marble faun); Emerson "closed the line, evidently too weary to hold himself erect, pitching headforemost . . ."; while Thoreau, circling around them, "performed dithyrambic dances and Bacchic leaps."

But what of the photographs of Henry referred to earlier, the daguerreotype in his thirty-ninth year by B. W. Maxham, made in 1856, and the ambrotype by E. S. Dunshee, made in 1861? Trying to get some sense of the man himself, in himself, which I do not get from his words alone, or from the accounts of Thoreau by others, I find myself looking again and again at these old pictures. Yes, the eyes are unusually large, very sensitive and thoughtful, as is the expression of the whole face. The nose is too long, the chin too small, neither an ornament; the face deeply lined, the brow high, the hair and beard luxuriant. A passable face, if not a handsome one. And it still seems to me that I read in his eyes, in his look, an elemental melancholy. A resigned sadness. But the man was ailing with tuberculosis when the former picture was made, within a year of his death when the second was made. These facts should explain the thoughtful look, justify a certain weariness. In neither picture can we see what might be considered a trace of self-pity—the *vulgar* sadness. And in neither can we perceive the faintest hint of any kind of desperation. Henry may have been lonely; he was never a desperate man.

What does it matter? For us it is Henry's words and ideas that count, or more exactly, the symbiotic and synergistic mutually reinforcing logic of word and idea, and his successful efforts to embody both in symbolic acts. If it were true that he never had a happy moment (I doubt this) in his entire life, he surely had an intense empathy with the sensations of happiness:

" . . . I have penetrated to those meadows on the morning of many a first spring day, jumping from hummock to hummock, from willow root to willow root, when the wild river valley and the woods were bathed in so pure and bright a light as would have waked the dead, if they had been slumbering in their

graves, as some suppose. There needs no stronger proof of immortality."

The paragraph is from the springtime of Henry's life. *Walden* is a young man's book, most of it written before his thirtieth year. But the infatuation with the sun and sunlight carries on into the premature autumn of his years as well: he never gave them up, never surrendered. Near the end of his life he wrote:

"We walked [jumping has become walking, but the spirit—and some of the phrasing—remains the same] in so pure and bright a light, gliding the withered grass and leaves, so softly and serenely bright, I thought I had never bathed in such a golden flood, without a ripple or a murmur to it. The west side of every wood and rising ground gleamed like the boundary of Elysium, and the sun on our backs seemed like a gentle herdsman driving us home at evening."

And concluding: "So we saunter toward the Holy Land, till one day the sun shall shine more brightly than ever he has done, shall perchance shine into our minds and hearts, and light up our whole lives with a great awakening light, as warm and serene and golden as on a bankside in autumn."

November 10, 1980

Onward, into Stillwater Canyon. We have left Labyrinth behind, though how Major Powell distinguished the two is hard to determine. The current is slow but no slower than before, the canyons as serpentine as ever. In the few straight stretches of water we gain a view of Candlestick Tower, now behind us, and off to the southwest, ahead, the great sandstone monadnock three hundred feet high known as Cleopatra's Chair, "bathed," as Henry would say, "in a golden flood of sunlight."

We row around an anvil-shaped butte called Turk's Head. Hard to see any reason for the name. Is there any reason, out here, for any name? These huge walls and giant towers and vast mazy avenues of stone resist attempts at verbal reduction. The historical view, the geological view, the esthetical view, the rock

climber's view, give us only aspects of a massive *presence* that remains fundamentally unknowable. The world is big and it is incomprehensible.

A hot still morning in Stillwater Canyon. We row and rest and glide, at two miles per hour, between riparian jungles of rusty willow, coppery tamarisk, brown cane and gold-leaf cottonwoods. On the shaded side the crickets sing their dirgelike monotone. They know, if we don't, that winter is coming.

But today is very warm for mid-November. An Indian-summer day. Looking at the rich brown river, jungle on both banks, I think how splendid it would be, and apposite, to see the rugose snout of an alligator come sliding through the water toward us. We need alligators here. Crocodiles, also. A few brontosauri, pteranodons, and rocs with twenty-five-foot wingspan would not be amiss. How tragic that we humans arrived too late, to the best of our conscious recollection, to have witnessed the fun and frolic of the giant thunder lizards in their time of glory. Why was that great chapter ripped too soon from the Book of Life? I would give ten years off the beginning of my life to see, only once, *Tyrannosaurus rex* come rearing up from the elms of Central Park; a Morgan police horse screaming in its jaws. We can never have enough of nature.

We explore a couple of unnamed side canyons on the right, searching for a natural stone arch I found ten years ago on a previous river journey. Hallucination Arch we named it then, a lovely span of two-tone rosy sandstone—not shown on any map—somewhere high in the northern fringes of the Maze. We do not find it this time. We pass without investigating a third unknown canyon; that must have been the right one.

We camp for two nights at the mouth of Jasper Canyon, spend the day between the nights exploring Jasper's higher ramifications, toward the heart of the Maze. If the Maze has a heart. We go on the following day, down the river, and come sailing out one fine afternoon into the confluence of the two great desert streams. The Green meets the Colorado. They do not immediately merge, however, but flow along side by side like

traffic lanes on a freeway, the greenish Colorado, the brownish Green, with a thin line of floisam serving as median.

Henry never was a joiner either.

"Know all men by these presents that I, Henry Thoreau, do not wish to be considered a member of any incorporated body which I have not joined."

A crusty character, Thoreau. An unpeeled man. A man with the bark on him.

We camp today at Spanish Bottom, near the first rapids of Cataract Canyon. Sitting around our fire at sundown, four of us gnawing on spareribs, the other two picking at their pussy food—tofu and spinach leaves and stewed kelp (it looks like the testicles of a sick octopus)—we hear the roar of tons of silty water plunging among the limestone molars of Brown Betty Rapid: teeth set on edge. The thunderous vibrations rise and fall, come and go, with the shifting evening winds.

We spend the next day wandering about the top of the Maze, under the shadows of Lizard Rock, Standing Rock, the Chimney, looking down into five-hundred-foot-deep canyons, into the stems, branches, and limbs of an arboreal system of part-time drainages. It took a liberal allowance of time, indeed, for the rare storms of the desert to carve out of solid rock these intricate canyons, each with its unscalable walls, boxlike heads, stomach-turning dropoffs. A man—aye and a woman too—could spend the better part of a life exploring this one area, getting to know, so far as possible, its broad outline and its intimate details. You could make your summer camp on Pete's Mesa, your winter camp down in Ernie's Country, and use Candlestick Spire all year round for a personalized private sundial. And die, when you're ready, with the secret center of the Maze clutched to your bosom. Or, more likely, never found.

Henry spent his life—or earned his life—exploring little more than the area surrounding his hometown of Concord. His jaunts beyond his own territory do not amount to much. He traveled once to Minnesota, seeking health, but that was a failure. He never came west although, as he says, he preferred walking in a

westerly direction. He never saw our Rocky Mountains or the Grand Canyon or the Maze. He never reached the Amazon, Alaska, Antarctica, the Upper Nile or the Mountains of the Moon. He journeyed once to Staten Island but was not impressed.

Instead he made a world out of Walden Pond, Concord, and their environs. He walked, he explored, every day and many nights, he learned to know his world as few ever know any world. Once as he walked in the woods with a friend (Thoreau had many friends, we come to realize, if not one in his lifetime with whom he could truly, deeply share his life; it is we his readers, over a century later, who must be and are his true companions), the friend expressed his long-felt wish to find an Indian arrowhead. At once Henry stopped, bent down and picked one up.

November 14, 1980

Today will be our last day on the river. We plan to run the rapids of Cataract Canyon this morning; camp on Lake Powell this afternoon, go on to Hite Marina and back to civilization, such as it is, tomorrow.

I rise early, as usual, and before breakfast go for a walk into the fields of Spanish Bottom. I see two sharp-shinned hawks roosting in a cottonwood. A tree of trembling leaves, pale gold and acid green. The hawks rise at my approach, circle, return to the tree as I go on. Out in the field, one hundred yards away, I see an erect neck, a rodentian head, a pair of muley ears displayed in sharp silhouette against the redrock cliffs. I stop, we stare at each other—the transient human, the ephemeral desert mule deer. Then I notice other deer scattered beyond the first: one, two, three, four, five—nine all told. Two with antlers.

My first thought is *meat*. Unworthy thought—but there they are, waiting, half of them standing broadside to me, their dear beating hearts on level with the top of the sand sage, saltbush, rice grass. Two of them within a hundred yards—easy range for

a thirty-thirty. Meat means survival. Survival, by Christ, with honor. With *honor*! When the cutes lie at the monster's feet we shall come here, my few friends and I, my sons and my daughters and we will survive. We shall live.

My second thought is more fitting, for the moment. Leave them in peace. Let them be. Efface yourself for a change and let the wild things be.

What would Henry say? Henry said, "There is a period in the history of the individual, as of the race, when the hunters are the 'best men,' as the Algonquins called them. We cannot but pity the boy who has never fired a gun; he is no more humane, while his education has been sadly neglected." But then he goes on to say: "No humane being, past the thoughtless age of boyhood, will wantonly murder any creature which holds its life by the same tenure that he does. The hare in its extremity cries like a child. I warn you, mothers, that my sympathies do not make the usual *philanthropic* distinctions." Is that his last word on the subject? Hardly. Henry had many words for every subject and no last word for any. He also writes, "But I see that if I were to live in a wilderness, I should become . . . a fisher and hunter in earnest."

So let them be for now. I turn back toward camp, making one step. The deer take alarm, finally, and move off at a walk. I watch. Their fear becomes contagious. One begins to run, they all run, bounding away toward the talus slopes of the canyon wall. I watch them leap upward into the rocks, expending energy with optimum ease, going farther and rising higher until they disappear, one by one, somewhere among the boulders and junipers at the foot of the vertical wall.

Back to camp and breakfast. We load the boats, secure the hatches, lash down baggage, strap on life jackets, face the river and the sun, the growing roar of the rapids. First Brown Betty, then Ben Hur and Capsize Rapids, then the Big Drop and Satan's Gut. Delightful names, and fitting. We feel the familiar rush of adrenaline as it courses through our blood. We've been here before, however, and know that we'll get through. Most

likely. The odds are good. Our brave boatman and boatwoman, Dusty and Lorna, ply the oars and steer our fragile craft into the glassy tongue of the first rapid. The brawling waters roar below, rainbows of broken sunlight dance in the spray. We descend.

Henry thou should be with us now.

I look for his name in the water, his face in the airy foam. He must be here. Wherever there are deer and hawks, wherever there is liberty and danger, wherever there is wilderness, wherever there is a living river, Henry Thoreau will find his eternal home.