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WILD APPLES

Lauren Groff

The path to the Oracle was best before dawn, past the pond sleepily switching from frogsong to birdsong, through the dark woods fringed with ferns, up the hill so steep that no matter how slowly I went, I was always out of breath when I reached the top. Three years ago, my parents contracted with a logging company to do what they thought was routine cutting of their 250 thickly forested acres in New Hampshire. Perhaps they were thinking of men in picturesque plaid workshirts with axes and the careful removal of a few choice maples; instead, a machine of murder arrived. It was the size of a two-story house, leaked diesel on the road, relentlessly tore up everything in its path. For hours, my parents sat frozen in their farmhouse, listening to what my father would later describe as the sound of the trees screaming. At last, the sound broke my parents, and they ran outside and up the hill and put their sexagenarian bodies in front of the giant machine, forcing it to stop. They were left with a lawsuit for breach of contract and two acres so apocalyptically chewed up that, the first time I saw them, I wept.

Yet devastation often uncovers great beauty, and life wants nothing more than to thrive; these are the great and vital solaces of nature. Out of the forest, the machine had ripped a splendid

long view of Smarts Mountain a few miles to the east. The summer after the devastation, my father had the felled trees dragged to the edges of the clearing. I bought the frame for a small house, eight feet by twelve, with a tiny porch, and we carried it up from the farm in pieces. My father and a neighbor spent months putting up the frame and finishing the little house with recycled windows and doors, pine boards from a tree my brother had had cut down and milled, a little cast-iron woodstove to heat it all. My father planted lupines near the porch, and all through the clearing the torn-up earth was covered in enormous soft-leaved mullein plants with their towering stalks of seeds, purple nettles larger than a grown adult, a thick covering of groundsel, often the first colonist of ravaged earth. The plant gets its name from the Old English *grundeswylige*, or ground-swallower; and the little plants' gluttony was wondrous to behold. By this summer, we had a fragile new meadow on a crown of the hill and a tiny house for me to write in, with a cot inside and two hammock-chairs on the porch for taking in the view. A few years earlier we'd made an old horse-barn on the farm into a place for my family to spend our summers in, and we called it the Barnacle; so we named this new dreamy little cabin that grew out of the ravaged hill the Oracle.

This summer I loved the Oracle until I didn't; and the difference in love or hate often came down to whether or not I had killed a field mouse in the night and had to deal with a corpse and the stink of death before I sat down to work in the mornings. Once, over a long weekend, I forgot to check the traps, and came up through the dawn to find a stiff, gutted mouse magically moving itself across the floor. I had to sit down in the hammock-chair on the porch outside until I stopped shaking, and when I had calmed myself and tried to sweep the mouse into the dustpan, I uncovered vivid black-and-yellow beetles

working to bear the gutted mouse away. If murdered mice awaited me, my guilt and revulsion made it hard for me to focus on the imaginary characters of my fiction; but even if the night hadn't proved me a murderer, I was of very little use to my work. "The incessant anxiety and strain of some is a well-nigh incurable form of disease," says Henry David Thoreau in *Walden*, a book that would soon prove to be the borrowed ghost of my summer.¹ For years, the world had been darkening so swiftly that the daily anxiety of watching the apocalypse on the internet and in the newspapers had slowly sapped every last drop of peace from me. The Arctic was on fire, Republicans were actively stealing all branches of government, a coronavirus pandemic was sweeping in appalling waves over every country on the planet. My family and I live in Florida, and when, in early May, we saw that the state would be the next center of the pandemic, we fled north over abandoned highways, nineteen hours straight, stopping only to pee in the bushes and pump gas. Our rationale was that a kind of wary isolation is already built into the way of life in New Hampshire and it would not be a stretch to quarantine there safely, for as many months as we needed to. My boys could run freely in the woods, and we could eat from my parents' enormous garden even as the world collapsed all around us.

When we arrived in New Hampshire, however, there were no leaves yet on the trees and only cold-loving hellebore blooming in the garden. My husband went back to Florida for work, and I was left alone with my boys and our black dog and the naked shivering trees. I found, day after day, that it was all I could do to hold my children and feed them and make sure they were alive and going to bed at a reasonable hour. Creating anything at all seemed impossible. The work of the soul tends to be sideways, looping, errant. I have put my art at the center of my

life for long enough that I am used to these times when my daily practice creates nothing more solid than daydreams; even so, the emptiness can drag me down. The only way to emerge out of these fallow times is to keep marching grimly through them.

And so I would go up to the Oracle to work every day and sit over my notebooks, shivering in the chill for an hour, which is the bare minimum I tend to make myself attempt to write. After this hour of wrestling with blankness, I released myself to reading, because close reading is also creative work. By June, I had picked up *Walden* again, though I'd hated it when I'd read it for a class in college, the swaggering frat-boy bluster of the crowing chanticleer Thoreau, his snobbery, his overwhelming sense of entitlement. I remembered the book as an early piece of performance art, an elaborately crafted lie, because while Thoreau was imagining himself rusticated, his mother still did his laundry for him and many nights he showed up at Emerson's house to eat a far finer supper than the unleavened bread and beans in his cabin that he made so much of in his book. But some vague echo that remained in me from my first experience of the book recalled it to me this year, insisting that I would find in it something that felt true, correct, urgent. Besides, now I had my very own Walden, even if the cottage there was built by my father's hands, not mine, even if it was overlooking Smarts Mountain and my pond was down a steep decline along the path back to the Barnacle. This time, I read slowly, only a few pages a day, because I had to put the book down every few lines to think.

I discovered a different book from the one I had thought I'd read; I discovered a love so powerful for Thoreau's energetic vision that it often took my breath away. I saw the wicked humor in the book, the laughing absurdity of what I'd taken twenty years before to be only tiresome bragging. Thoreau's sentences have such vigor that they sometimes made my body need to

stand up and pace to dissipate their pent energy. I began to use my daily *Walden* pages as a form of meditation, which I would carry with me after I finished my coffee in the Oracle and reset the mousetraps and called my dog to heel and descended the hill to wake up my children and feed them eggs and set them loose to the farm chores my father planned for them every day: weeding, picking up sticks, mowing the grass. With the boys occupied, I would go for a run in the forest, my eyes borrowed from Thoreau. I would delight in the world waking to spring; the newborn fawn and doe I startled on a run, the doe groaning and stomping at me before bounding white-tailed away, the fawn bent and trembling, pretending to be nothing more than dried leaves in the ditch. Trillium and columbine emerged, ferns uncurled, the peonies arrived all blowsy and blushing. Time progressed.

When July came, I no longer needed a fire in the woodstove, and the meadow around the Oracle pushed upward gloriously in green, the birds so loud they were deafening in the pale dawn. My dog and I ran every day through the birches and startled a bear and her cubs into a tree. Chicks came in the mail, confused by their recent birth into the light and the immediate return to the darkness of the box they were shipped in. We kept them in the red blaze of a heat lamp in the chicken barn, and each of us went in separately to cradle them in our hands, all in our endless isolation yearning for some kind of intimacy with strangers. The dogs began to disappear for hours into the hills and we could hear them barking at some beast out there, and when we called them they would take a quarter of an hour before they'd rush out of the trees, grinning toothily, and run by us to plunge into the pond, shocking the newts that lay so thickly in the tannic water. Soon, the pond was warm enough for humans to swim

in, and floating there in the layer of heat atop the dense cold sublayer became our afternoon ritual, the delicious prize at the end of our mostly failed attempts to work.

It was in July that I finished the first of my slow reads of *Walden*, and I immediately returned to the first page and started the book over again. When I was a young person, I thought that *Walden* was a young person's book, a ferociously oppositional cockcrow designed to "wake [Thoreau's] neighbors up."² The writer hates the intentional servitude of the yeoman to his daily grind, the way that, with capitalism and its built-in ethos of the hoarding of goods, our houses and things end up owning us. He resists the hard-nosed Yankee ethos he sees all around him, the unquestioning acquiescence to convention that turns potential poets and philosophers into beasts of burden, working too hard to have a chance to sit in leisure and think. This is the obvious intention of the book, the single note hit over and over, sometimes arrogantly, as with his condescending evisceration of the Irishman John Field, "with his horizon all his own, yet he is a poor man, born to be poor, with his inherited Irish poverty or poor life, his Adam's grandmother and boggy ways, not to rise in this world, he nor his posterity, till their wading, webbed, bog-trotting feet get *talaria* to their heels."³ But what I also saw now, in my middle-aged isolation from the ever more deeply troubled world, is that this book that first takes the form of a harangue becomes, through each chapter pushing ever deeper into the experience of inhabiting this particular place in time, an exquisite song of praise. *Walden* is an alleluia of the romantic self. On this third reading of the book, I understood that Thoreau's great contribution to literature lies in the wild strangeness of his close reading of nature, the intensity of his insistence that if one looks hard enough, one will see through the scrim of the familiar and into the astonishing gift of singularity. Walden

Pond is like all other ponds in that objectively little about it makes this pond stand out from all the rest of New England ponds; and yet under Thoreau's loving attention, Walden becomes only and miraculously itself. Out of the understanding of the singularity of place there comes a parallelism within the beholder's soul; it is through observation the contours of the nebulous self can come clearer, almost within reach.

The gift of close reading translates into the gift of perspective. Thoreau can look at Walden and see not only the subtle changes in the place as the seasons progress, he can see the layers of humanity upon the land, the past, the present, and future existing all at once:

I have been surprised to detect encircling the pond, even where a thick wood has just been cut down on the shore, a narrow shelf-like path in the steep hillside, alternately rising and falling, approaching and receding from the water's edge, as old probably as the race of man here, worn by the feet of aboriginal hunters, and still from time to time unwittingly trodden by the present occupants of the land. This is particularly distinct to one standing on the middle of the pond in winter, just after a light snow has fallen, appearing as a clear undulating white line, unobscured by weeds and twigs, and very obvious a quarter of a mile off in many places where in summer it is hardly distinguishable close at hand. The snow reprints it, as it were, in clear white type alto-relievo. The ornamented grounds of villas which will one day be built here may still preserve some trace of this.⁴

Thoreau's shift in perspective telescopes down, even to the creatures that lie beneath the ordinary concerns of humanity; I can think of few war passages in literature as stirring as Thoreau's war of the red and black ants. There is nothing so small that

Thoreau cannot delight in it. In him, as in the greatest of American geniuses—Walt Whitman, Herman Melville, Emily Dickinson—life is ecstatic and the anagogical arises out of the teeming, living dirt of Earth.

Under the pressure of Thoreau's prose, my own low vision slowly lifted out of me, away from the slow and internal wildfire of circular anxiety. Up in my cabin, I sat and read and spent hours looking at the clouds in their slow cetacean passing. I went out to the forest on runs measured not by the minute but by the anticipation of what new plant would be emerging in the swales: bird vetch, Joe-Pye weed, wild raspberry blooming from flower into fruit. The chickens fattened; the roosters tried out their hilariously cracked adolescent crowing. In August, the hornets arrived and I batted their nests away from the beams of the Oracle with the back of a broom, feeling like a hypocrite in destroying these perfect hornet houses, which were far superior to any human habitation, being only as large as necessary, ornamented solely by their own geometry.

Then September came; my runs grew ever longer and hillier. My parents' garden spat out endless tomatillos, potatoes, Jerusalem artichokes. The dirt roads of my runs became speckled with wormy wild apples, the best of which I held in my hand as I ran, and ate when I stopped, the tart, sharp perfect savor of fruit that felt forbidden for having been forgotten by the humans who owned it, for being earned by my sweat. How I loved those heirloom strains—the blush green and yellow wild apples, like Thoreau's own that he tasted in the farmsteads all around Concord—that had been left like trash to feed the birds and deer and solitary me. In the lengthening dawns, the roosters woke us with their ever more competent crowing; until one day the renderer came and beheaded all twenty-seven chickens one by one, bleeding them, gutting them, scalding their feathers off,

packing them in plastic. So it goes for all of us: from fluffy chickhood we advance to a crowing flapping squabbling prime, then with swift violence we are made meat.

One day, I ran ten miles to Trout Pond, shallow and glistening and, other than the path trod there, endlessly empty of other human trace. When I stepped upon the boulder at the pond, I saw a bald eagle swimming through the water to shore. At the sight of the swimming eagle something stilled at the very center of me; that the great master of the air found itself just now flying through water seemed a phenomenon both natural and wildly unnatural, obvious and yet impossible. I watched the vast bird climb out and shake itself off, and knew this was the best thing I would see for a long time, that it carried a metaphor too deep for me to ever desire to explicate it. My project of isolation and contemplation in the woods was finished. My summer died with the eagle at Trout Pond.

I had one last morning in the Oracle, which in mid-September was again as chilly as it had been in May. I brought Thoreau with me as my new friend. It had been a very long summer of revolutionary words, none of which were mine. When, after a few hours, the coffee was gone and the dog stood and pressed her nose to the door, knowing that down the hill the boys would be stirring, I closed the door and abandoned the little house to the mice and hornets. On our descent, the pond, too cold to swim in any longer, glinted softly through the trees. "I left the woods for as good a reason as I went there," Thoreau writes in *Walden*. "Perhaps it seemed to me that I had several more lives to live, and could not spare any more time for that one."⁵ We cannot prevent what we live through from changing us deeply; changed, we carry our former selves into the future. We are devastated, but then the plants take hold, and by being devoured, we find ourselves renewed. Life wants nothing

more than to live. The best we can do under the terrible pressure of the moment is to resist with all our might the forces conspiring to make us into mindless mules of capitalism, to remove ourselves from the internet, to turn our attention to the singular.

We returned to Florida, taking three leisurely days this time. I arrived to find a garden suffocated by weeds, a hurricane brewing in the Gulf, a yellow banana spider the size of my hand guarding the back door. The pandemic had grown so intense in my county that we glowed a red eye on the online maps of the disease. I was glad to find that Thoreau had dogged me all the way into the subtropics, and even in such humidity was still whispering his half-cracked imprecations in my ear. Look hard enough at the humble things that surround the body, Thoreau crows in his work of generosity and genius. Look at a pond no more miraculous than any other pond in the world, which is to say infinitely miraculous, look at your own ponds whatever shape they take, even this retention pond scooped by man and host to alligators and mosquitoes, look deeply, through time, and we can all—even you, paltry worried creature of the twenty-first century—reach through the general then into particular and then into the stuff of self. Read so closely that the landscape you're in or the book you're reading *becomes* you. It is through such constant, intense close reading that you can touch the edges of your soul.