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Heart-berry

A modern woman rambles through a season with Thoreau

Kristen Laine

Most of us are still related to our native fields as the navigator to undiscovered islands in the sea. . . . We can any afternoon discover a new fruit there which will surprise us by its beauty or sweetness. So long as I saw in my walks one or two kinds of berries whose names I did not know, the proportion of the unknown seemed indefinitely, if not infinitely, great.

—Henry David Thoreau, *Wild Fruits*



ON A HAZY AFTERNOON JUST PAST THE MIDDLE OF JUNE, THE heaviness of the air prophesying better than the calendar the start of another summer, I steal away from our houseful of guests and from our preparations for tonight's party. In a few hours, our daughter and some of her friends will celebrate their eighth-grade graduation. There will be cake, music in the barn, and a bonfire, where the new high-schoolers will ceremonially burn math tests and English composition assignments. The flickering light will seem to show them as the young adults they may become; then they'll wheel away to chase fireflies around the meadow.

Right now, I seek a respite from the relentlessness of the to-do list. I walk across a dirt road and down into the field. Purple aster rises above the timothy and foxtail grasses, which have not yet reached their full height. A question had broken the surface of all that busyness—half-formed, but enough to propel me out the door: Were the wild strawberries ripe?

A month ago, the fragrant white flowers of *Fragaria virginiana*, North America's wild strawberry, had blanketed the meadow. I'm surprised by how hard I must now seek for their fruit. Thoreau wrote that the tiny, elusive berries were "at first hard to detect amid the red lower leaves" of the wild strawberry, "as if Nature meant thus to conceal the fruit, especially if your mind is unprepared for it." I stand still, feeling the warmth of the sun on my neck, and scan the ground around me. I take in waxy yellow buttercups and the delicate purples and blues of low-bush blueberries, still flowering. Red leaves, already looking autumnal, lead me to a plant, its upper leaves still green and lightly serrated. I lift the leaves but find no berries.

I amble to a part of the meadow where the grasses grow less well in the sandy soil. Sitting back on my heels rewards me with a new angle and my first berry. It is tiny, smaller than the tip of my little finger, but round, red, and ripe. I pull it gently from the hull and cup my hand around it. Before long, I hold a small handful, the berries like jewels.

Do not think, then, that the fruits of New England are mean and insignificant while those of some foreign land are noble and memorable. Our own, whatever they may be, are far more important to us than any others can be. They educate us and fit us to live here.

—*Wild Fruits*

Thoreau thought that nature meant to conceal the fruits of the wild strawberry.

ILLUSTRATION © ABIGAIL RORER FROM *WILD FRUITS* BY H. D. THOREAU, W.W. NORTON & CO., 2000

In 1850, Henry David Thoreau was 32 years old and had 12 more years to live. His first book, *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*, written as a memorial to his brother John, had sold poorly. Ralph Waldo Emerson, his friend and rival, had encouraged Thoreau to pay for the printing himself and then given it a lukewarm review. Thoreau had announced a “forthcoming” book, but it would be four more years before *Walden, or Life in the Woods* made it into print. In debt, discouraged, Thoreau had moved back in with his parents, into the third-floor attic of their Concord home. “I feel ripe for something,” he wrote in his journal that September, “yet do nothing, can’t discover what that thing is.”

To pay his creditors, Thoreau started a small surveying business, walking the fields and forests of Concord and neighboring towns. As one who tired easily of human companionship, he likely also walked for himself, simply to secure a daily dose of solitude. He called his walking “sauntering.” Placing his home at the center of a circle of 10-miles’ radius, he often covered 20 or 30 miles a day, avoiding roads and settlements.

Within the year, his rambles would lead him to “that thing,” the purpose he sought: a deeper and more complete knowledge of his place in the world.

At a time when thousands of ambitious, curious seekers were embarking on voyages of Olympian scope around the tip of South America, through the Panamanian isthmus, or across North America—“Argonauts” in search of California’s golden fleece—Henry David Thoreau stayed home. He sailed forth on “the unexplored sea” of Concord, Massachusetts, determined to understand the natural phenomena of his native land. He wrote detailed observations of the sequences in which trees leafed out, plants flowered, and fruits ripened; he followed the life cycles of turtles, frogs, and other forest animals. He went beyond mere cataloguing to explore the connections between sequences: how small ponds, created by spring rains and snowmelt, became frog nurseries; how birds and squirrels dispersed seeds; how wild berries sustained wildlife. The voyage would take him to the end of his life.

Thoreau heeded Emerson’s exhortation to create an authentic American voice; with *Walden*, he would contribute one of the country’s most lasting pieces of literature. The work of Thoreau’s final decade was his attempt to expand the American character by incorporating its native nature in the national identity. He wanted his fellow citizens to take their lessons from the land.

When he died in May 1862, he left behind two unfinished works in almost 1,000 manuscript pages, *Wild Fruits* and *The Dispersion of Seeds*; more than 700 pages of notes and charts tracking a decade of nature in Concord; and 3,000 pages of notes on “aboriginal North America.” His journal entries alone exceeded 2 million words.

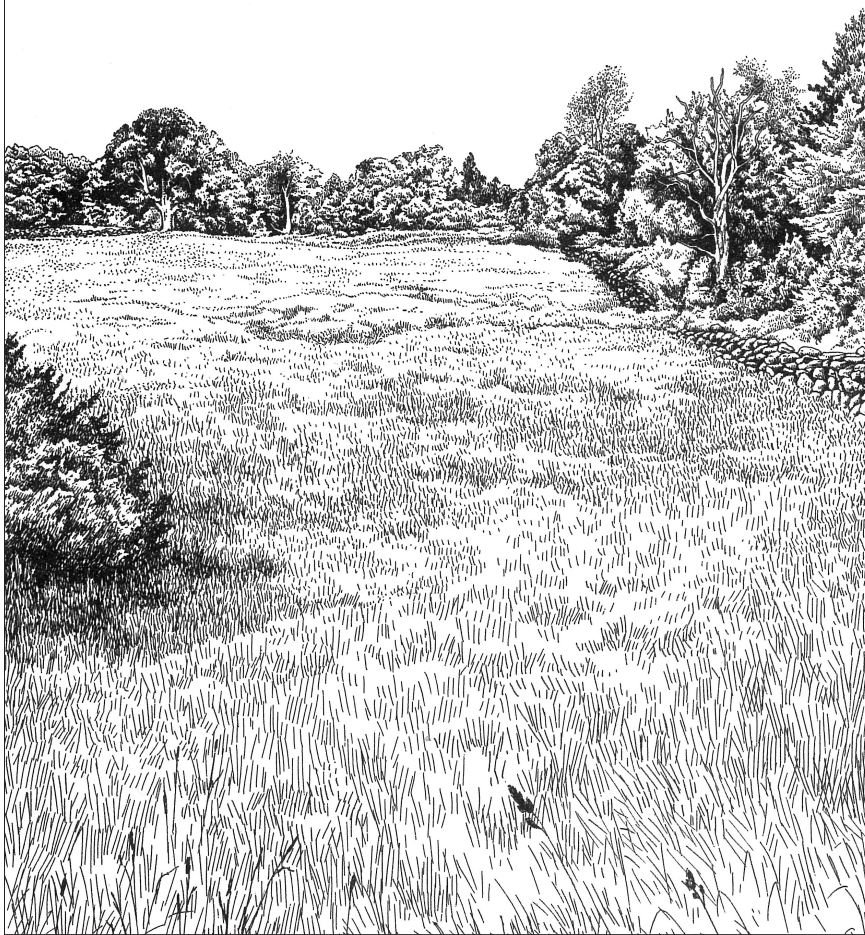
Many scholars and critics—and even Thoreau’s friends—thought he had chosen a poor way to spend his last dozen years. After Thoreau’s death, Emerson wrote that Thoreau had been “born for great enterprise and for command,” and regretted that “instead of engineering for all America, he was the captain of a huckleberry party.” A century after his death, Thoreau’s late works remained unpublished; few scholars tried to decipher his nearly illegible handwriting and read what he had written.

I have met with but one or two persons in the course of my life who understood the art of Walking, that is, of taking walks, who had a genius, so to speak, for *sauntering*; which word is beautifully derived “from idle people who roved about the country, in the middle ages, and asked charity, under pretence of going *à la sainte terre*”—to the holy land, till the children exclaimed, “There goes a *sainte-terror*,” a saunterer—a holy lander.

—“Walking,” 1851

Two months before the strawberries ripened, I decided that I would saunter through a season, following Thoreau’s characteristically cheeky definition. I would trace the arc of the passing weeks from spring to summer on my home ground, a high, hummocky bench of land in the central highlands of New Hampshire. My house would be the meridian, as Thoreau’s attic rooms were his. I would travel away from and back to it, always by foot, always alone. My only companion would be Thoreau himself—specifically the middle-aged naturalist of his later writing.

I started late in the morning on a warm, clear April day, happy for the chance to get outdoors and cover some ground. In addition to the usual day-trip essentials—extra clothing, water, food, map, and compass—I packed an abridged version of Thoreau’s *Journal* from 1851, a nature guide, a small notebook and pen, and a digital recorder. Thoreau carried a diary, pencil, and pocket spyglass on his walks; eventually, he added a botanical guide and an old music book for pressing plants, and built a “scaffold” inside the crown of his hat to carry specimens.



Thoreau spent hours observing the relatively unwild fields and woods of Concord.

ILLUSTRATION © ABIGAIL RORER FROM *FAITH IN A SEED* BY H. D. THOREAU, ISLAND PRESS, 1993

I walked quickly through our meadow, skirted a wetland, and toiled uphill to a ridge that afforded me a fine view of 3,155-foot Mount Cardigan. I recorded observations here and there without stopping, noting how fast spring was coming on. Listening to the recording later, I thought my breathing provided an audible bass line to the list of what I had seen as I hiked: trout lily, *huff*, ostrich and elephant ferns, *huff*, Cardigan's bald summit, *huff*.

I had the sudden sense that I had not been sauntering at all. Thoreau had covered many more miles, but while taking his time, sometimes pausing to sit for hours. I, on the other hand, had been rushing.

Thoreau may also have had to learn to slow down. His journal entries from his early saunters, I noticed, sometimes amounted to little more than lists, too. From April 26, 1851: "Gathered the May flower and cowslips yesterday—and saw the houstonia violet. Saw a Dandelion in blossom."

I soon found myself observing when plants first blossomed and leafed, and I followed it up early and late, far and near, several years in succession, running to different sides of the town and into the neighboring towns, often between 20 and 30 miles in a day.

—“Walking”

I quarreled with Thoreau. He was a single man, solitary, who did not have to work to put a roof over his head. I had a husband, children, bills to pay. I did not have hours to “saunter” every day, even to the holy land.

In my twenties, during a several-year period when I hiked and climbed all over the continent, I hadn’t cared much for Thoreau. It seemed to me then that the young men most likely to carry a tattered and heavily underlined copy of *Walden* were those least comfortable and least competent in the outdoors. His followers bent even more nails than he had. They made me mistrust him.

Thoreau’s acolytes seemed to fix their gaze permanently back in time, to some imagined simpler life. In that lamp-lit past, I likely wouldn’t have survived my childbearing years; my ancestors toiled under conditions they would flee at the first possible opportunity. Like their patron saint, Thoreau’s lost boys didn’t seem to recognize the privileges of their class and gender. They assumed that hands other than their own would make their meals and do their laundry, that they could choose to work and choose what work they did, and that they would always have a willing audience for their views.

Thoreau’s willful provincialism baffled me. He persisted in attaching himself to a part of the country that contained little wildness even when he was alive. In college, I’d spent time at Walden Pond and its environs. Concord and Lincoln had become manicured bedroom communities even in the 1970s, zoned in 5-acre house lots; Walden had the look of a hard-used city park. When I went west after graduation, staking my heart’s claim to its rougher wilderness and eager to leave behind my own provincial past, I wondered if underneath his philosophizing Thoreau had simply been afraid to leave what he knew and had therefore made a virtue of *not* striking out for the territories.

In Thoreau’s journals, women were diminished creatures. Could he have imagined the expansive life I led as a young woman, rambling over mountain ranges? Could I have imagined then that being tethered to home and family would enrich my experience of the natural world? I feel a deeper—dare I say more animal?—connection to nature for having experienced sexual passion and mother-love. What would Thoreau say to that?

At Heart-Leaf Pond the croaking frogs are in full blast. I saw many on the surface Most utter a short croak Others use a peculiar squirming and nasal variation hard to imitate . . . something like *what what what what* spoken nasally. Then all will be silent.

—*Journal*, April 8, 1854

I reframed my pact with Thoreau. I drew a circle around a smaller radius; dropped the map, compass, and recorder; kept the nature guide and the journal. “The naturalist accomplishes a great deal by patience, perhaps more than by activity,” Thoreau wrote one April day while watching wood frogs.

When marriage brought me back to New England, at first I saw only the smallness of its landscape. Its trees were runty, its ancient mountains eroded to front-range height, leaving me longing for sweeping views of distant ranges beyond. Ironically, it was one of the tiniest of the region’s creatures—wood frogs, whose springtime exuberance gave me hope—that opened my heart. They brought my gaze closer in, and helped me start seeing the nature around me.

In recent years, I had not heard the distinctive quacking croak of wood frogs along our road. The town road agent had drained the roadsides in his quest for dry passage. Spring moved ahead in lesser form without their accompaniment. During winter snowshoes along the ridge, though, I’d noticed a slight concavity beneath a stand of hemlocks and wondered if it filled with wood frogs in the spring. I returned to the ridgeline again, now with a destination and, I hoped, with an increasing store of patience. I wouldn’t see frogs in late April, but perhaps I would see their eggs.

Even without a trail to follow, I recognized the route I used in winter. I had my preferred pathways, I supposed, just like the deer whose trails I intersected and sometimes followed. Their browse lines hemmed the hemlock. Even without the trails and the browse lines, the ticks told me I was in deer country. I swiped them from my pants and shirt, glad I’d tucked my pants into my socks.

A moist, leaf-matted oval the size of my day pack was all that remained of the ephemeral pool, if indeed one had ever existed beneath the hemlocks. Nearby, though, I found an abandoned prospect pit, a relic of a nineteenth-century mica-mine boom in our town. I counted eight egg masses in its tannic water. A black dot glistened at the center of each egg like a black pearl. They matched the picture of wood-frog eggs in my nature guide. I was heartened by the thought that I could return another spring and hear what Thoreau called “the earliest voice of the pools.”

The strawberry is our first edible fruit to ripenBy the thirtieth of May I notice the green fruit; and two or three days later, as I am walking, perhaps, over the southerly slope of some dry and bare hill, or where there are bare and sheltered spaces between the bushes, it occurs to me that strawberries have possibly set; and looking carefully in the most favorable places, just beneath the top of the hill, I discover the reddening fruit, and at length, on the very driest and sunniest spot or brow, two or three berries which I am forward to call ripe, though generally only their sunny cheek is red.

—*Wild Fruits*

Wild Fruits, one of Thoreau's unfinished manuscripts, was finally edited and published in its incomplete state in 2000. Until then, only small portions of the manuscript, or indeed of Thoreau's plans for his naturalist observations, had been available to general readers.

The manuscript's first expansive section discussed the wild strawberry. In it, Thoreau claimed that only one in a hundred knew where to look for early strawberries; I took that as a challenge. One morning in early May I set out to ramble the meadows and open hillsides within my small radius in search of them. I wasn't trying for a summit, distance, or even exercise, I reminded myself. I would go slowly, stop often, and notice.

Thoreau's pleasure in the berries rises off the pages of *Wild Fruits* like their "ineffable" fragrance when ripe. He dismisses the garden-grown variety, "raised and sold by your excellent hard-fisted neighbor." He sought the wild berry, and a higher form of enjoyment, on dry hillsides—"but commonly it is only a taste that we get hereabouts, and then proceed on our way with reddened and fragrant fingers. . . ."

Wild Fruits makes the argument that we are, or we become, the product of where we live as surely as do plants and animals. What we eat, the ground we walk on, what we notice, or don't, of our natural surroundings forms us. If the process goes well, our interactions with the natural world "educate us and fit us to live here." If it doesn't, our lives are stunted; we are either masters or slaves, reduced to mere trade and no true pleasure.

On that cloudless May morning, I discovered strawberries in bloom all around me. Blossoms, each containing four spotless white petals around a mounded yellow sun, covered the meadow across the road. They formed a small carpet in the field next to the swamp. I even saw them in the woods where perhaps enough sun reached them to set berries. I heard a faint noise and turned to see a bee settle on one of the flowers.

"The walker in this neighborhood does well if he gets two or three handfuls of this fruit in a year," Thoreau wrote in *Wild Fruits*. I had discovered the curve of my arc. I would end my season when the wild strawberries were ripe.

The recent rush to California and the attitude of the world, even of its philosophers and prophets, in relation to it appears to me to reflect the greatest disgrace on mankind. That so many are ready to get their living by the lottery of gold-digging without contributing any value to society.

—*Journal*, February 2, 1852

Thoreau had not yet entered his naturalist period when news reached the East Coast of the discovery of gold at Sutter's Mill in California. Over the following years, he had nothing but harsh words for the hundreds of thousands who rushed to the territory (so many people that it quickly became the 31st state).

He had already lived through great changes. The economic cataclysm of the industrial revolution had been playing out for decades, gradually transforming towns like Concord from agricultural to mercantile centers. The first rail cars had steamed past Walden Pond in 1844. But Thoreau seemed to have a premonition that the California Gold Rush presaged a greater change in American identity and in the nation's mythology. "Going to California," he groused in the February 1852 journal entry. "It is only 3,000 miles nearer to Hell." Future scholars would point to the Gold Rush as the moment after which the American dream incorporated get-rich-quick schemes and gambles.

Thoreau had a complicated relationship with the mythology of his country, even as he helped create it. He urged his fellow citizens not to take their cues from the Old World. "In every part of Great Britain are discovered traces of the Romans," he wrote. "But New England, at least, is not based on any Roman ruins. We have not to lay the foundations of our houses on the ashes of a former civilization." Instead, he looked west, to unspoiled Oregon territory, but perhaps even more, he looked inward. "The future lies that way to me," wrote the man firmly planted in New England. "Eastward I go only by force; but westward I go free."

Looking west in that way, however, created an oddly paradoxical backward glance. Even in his description of wild strawberries, native to the Americas, Thoreau looked wistfully back at an earlier, Edenic New England, before the colonists arrived. He compiled a mournful list of wild strawberry fields from

that earlier time that would have filled “a good ship.” They are “the first blush of a country,” he wrote, “its morning red, a sort of ambrosial food which grows only on Olympian soil.”

I spend a considerable portion of my time observing the habits of the wild animals, my brute neighbors. . . . But when I consider that the nobler animals have been exterminated here,—the cougar, panther, lynx, wolverene, wolf, bear, moose, deer, the beaver, the turkey, etc., etc.—I cannot but feel as if I lived in a tamed, and, as it were, emasculated country. . . . Is it not a maimed and imperfect nature that I am conversant with? As if I were to study a tribe of Indians that had lost all its warriors.

—*Journal*, March 23, 1856

I wonder what Thoreau would make of the reemergence of wild nature in New England. The land in my part of New Hampshire is much more wild than it was 150 years ago. Bear, bobcat, moose, beaver, and wild turkey thrive—all animals whose absence Thoreau mourned in Concord’s woods. This spring a bear was trapped in Brookline, 15 miles from Thoreau’s Concord.

Still, I don’t mind not being prey. Rereading notes from my earlier ridge walk, I came upon a short mention of hearing a chuff, the classic bear’s warning sound. I had stopped, listened, quickly worked out the low probability that I would cross paths with a bear—or come between a sow and her cubs—in those woods, and moved on.

The comment jumped out at me because the year’s unnatural spring had been an extraordinary one for human–bear interactions. Up and down our road, bears had gotten into people’s garbage, nosed around on porches and in garden sheds. An article about the Massachusetts bear said that it had a “July appetite, but with June food sources,” and that the disruption drove it out of its normal range.

My scribbled note caught me up short for another reason. One early morning in June, an hour before daylight, I heard a clatter and discovered a glossy-coated bear rooting through garbage barrels it had pulled out from under what we’d thought was our carport’s bear-proof storage. Acting on instinct, I stepped out the door to shoo the animal away and found myself only two or three feet from it and suddenly aware of its size. The bear lowered its big head, pushed its snout toward me, and chuffed. Unmistakably the same sound I had heard in the woods.

I'm glad that wolves and grizzly bears have returned to parts of the West and that the mountain lion population is rebounding, but glad, as well, that here in New Hampshire my paths and theirs have no chance of crossing as I go through my daily life. What I know of Henry David makes me think he might have maintained a more principled line, continued walking without companion or gun in woods where he could be mauled or eaten. But he might not have entered them with the same ease I find in the pages of his journals, the same comfort and joy. It's possible he took for granted, or undervalued, the benefits he gained in a detoothed and declawed nature.

As we stand by the monument on the Battle-Ground, I see a white pine dimly on the horizon just north of Lee's Hill, at 5:30 P.M., its upright stem and straight horizontal feathered branches, while at the same time I hear a robin sing. Each enhances the other. That tree seems the emblem of my life; it stands for the west, the wild.

—*Journal*, April 21, 1852

Just south of our house, what looks like a single tree from a short distance away is, on closer inspection, a pair of trees that have grown side by side at the edge of the field. Their limbs overlap and quarrel, like twins whose struggle for dominance continues into old age. From a naturalist's perspective, the trees are good examples of old-field succession, among 50 or so tall white pines whose distinctive profiles—their, you might say, Thoreauvian independence from regularity—we can pick out above the rest of the third-growth forest.

In the final decade of his life, Thoreau saw the last of New England's old-growth pine forests sent to the sawmill. Close to home, he had walked through white pine groves and returned to them a year or two later to find a farmer clearing stumps. Here and there, a solitary white pine would stand, as Thoreau scholar Robert D. Richardson, Jr., wrote, "visible for miles around, a giant with no companions left."

I found hundreds of strawberry plants in bloom under the trees' awkwardly flung heavy limbs.

In Gary Snyder's collection of essays, *Practice of the Wild*, he imagined a reversal of standard forest management, an "all-age unmanaged" community, in which the oldest trees can "give up all sense of propriety and begin throwing their limbs out in extravagant gestures," become eccentric, laughing, ragged,

fearless. Imagine, he wrote, if humans could remain standing after they died, becoming snags, sheltering new growth: “We would hear news like, ‘Henry David Thoreau finally toppled over.’”

This is the wild future I imagine for Thoreau. “The white pine bears seeds sparingly, in cones that mature and open high on the tree,” Richardson wrote. I would not be surprised if he thought of Thoreau as he wrote: “Although it scatters less seed than most other pines, it does manage to propagate itself.”

What means this sense of lateness that so comes over one now,—as if the rest of the year were down-hill, and if we had not performed anything before, we should not now? The season of flowers or of promise may be said to be over, and now is the season of fruits: but where is our fruit? . . . What have we done with our talent? All nature prompts and reproves us. How early in the year it begins to be late! It matters not by how little we have fallen behind; it seems irretrievably late. The year is full of warnings of its shortness, as is life.

—*Journal*, August 17, 1853

Thoreau grappled with a question that all have after a certain age—all who walk with it, who give themselves solitude to consider it: What will be the fruits of my life?

I look across the meadow, not quite ready to return to the to-do list and the preparations for tonight’s graduation party. I started my sauntering project already older than Thoreau was when he died. I share with him what seems the universal human need to measure out one’s life in seasons. We orient ourselves by seasons within the arc of a life, even though we can’t know its exact span. How fully do we blossom in the spring of our lives? Do we bear sufficient fruit? Are we prepared for death?

Thoreau wasn’t immune to the common sensation of middle age, of time passing ever more rapidly. “Methinks my seasons revolve more slowly than those of nature,” he wrote optimistically at age 34. “I am differently timed.” Why should he mature, he asked, on the same time schedule as an apple tree, or even an oak: “If my curve is large, why bend it to a smaller circle?”

In later journal entries, though, he worried—poetically, allusively, but worried all the same—that his “season of promise” would bear only small fruit. For more than a century, it appeared that his fears were well founded. “The scale on which his studies proceeded was so large as to require longevity,” Emerson wrote in a eulogy. “It seems an injury that he should leave in the midst of his broken task”

Thoreau believed enough in the work of his later years to set it on an ambitious arc spanning several decades. One aspect of his genius lay in his ability to explore complexity without needing to corral it. During his life and for years after his death, botanists and biologists dismissed Thoreau's research because of his sloppy field identifications. But I think it possible that he understood the limitations of taxonomic categories, the extent to which they reflected the scientific fashion of the day, and found them ultimately unimportant to his goals.

By tethering himself to a 10-mile radius of Concord, Thoreau could aim for comprehensiveness. His detailed groundwork allowed him to quickly grasp the significance of Charles Darwin's theories of natural selection and adaptation. Thoreau was among the first American naturalists to read *On the Origin of Species*, after a friend brought a copy of the manuscript to Concord on New Year's Day 1860. Thoreau immediately applied Darwin's tropical research to his home ground and saw in operation there "a world of continuous creation."

More than 130 years after his death, the first part of Thoreau's late work was published as *Faith in a Seed*. Ethnobotanist and writer Gary Nabhan wrote in the introduction to that book that Thoreau's late work "clearly anticipate[d] issues in plant population biology and coevolution that did not become fully articulated in evolutionary ecology until the early 1970s."

In other words, science had only just caught up to Thoreau. His curve was large, indeed.

The art of spending a day! If it is possible that we may be addressed, it behooves us to be attentive. If by watching all day and all night, I may detect some trace of the Ineffable, then will it not be worth the while to watch? . . . To watch for, to describe, all the divine features which I detect in Nature. My profession is to be always on the alert to find God in nature—to know his lurking places.

—*Journal*, September 7, 1851

I am humbled after spending a season with Thoreau. I no longer dismiss him as the patron saint of lost boys. Instead, I call him the patron saint of each day's miracle and stand in awe of his endlessly replenishing joy in nature.

Thoreau was ahead of his time in creating an American voice and in creating an ecology of place. He was ahead of his time—outside time—

in establishing the philosophy behind nonviolent civil disobedience. I think he may still be out ahead of us in his understanding of the “divine features” of nature. Thoreau unselfconsciously blended faith in nature, the divine, and the self—faiths far more separated in our time. For him, all three faiths seem to lead to the same destination. If we eventually understand that our human sense of spirituality arises from the miracle of life on this planet, we will find Thoreau already standing there, ready to shelter us.

He believed that by “learning the language of these fields,” we would become people of this land. He asked, in language that reaches easily across generations, What do we give our hearts to? How do we belong to the land we live in? Where is the place we stand?

Through this spring, from ice-out to ripening strawberries, I have come to a greater understanding of where I stand, and of where Thoreau stood. In *Wild Fruits*, after writing that “the walker in this neighborhood”—no doubt someone who looked a lot like Thoreau—“does well if he gets two or three handfuls” of wild strawberries a year, he added, “But it is not so up-country . . . A hundred miles north from here”—in New Hampshire—“you can hardly believe with what vigor they grow and bear.”

Thoreau may have looked west conceptually for his American wilderness, but when he visited wilder places, he traveled north, and often to New Hampshire’s central highlands, my meridian. His native land was less wild, but he found it wild enough to sustain him, and he celebrated it.

From him, I’ve learned to celebrate the land I stand on. It doesn’t approach the lost aboriginal paradise Thoreau imagined. Nonetheless, after spending a season with his words and ideas as my companions, it feels fresh to me, still essentially untamed. It connects me to myself as the land around Concord connected Thoreau to himself, and as the land we both belong to connects us to what’s beyond us.

But it is not without some misgivings that we accept this gift. The middle of June is past, and it is dry and hazy weather. . . . Even the birds sing with less vigor and vivacity. The season of hope and promise is passed, and already the season of *small fruits* has arrived. We are a little saddened because we begin to see the interval between our hopes and their fulfillment. The prospect of the heavens is taken away by the haze, and we are presented with a few small berries.

—*Wild Fruits*

One day during the climbing season in which I was probably at the peak of my abilities, though I didn't know it at the time, a friend and I had to wait for another party to finish a pitch above us. We waited on a ledge; to pass the time she told me a short story, a Zen kōan.

A man was walking through a forest when a tiger began chasing him. He ran with all his strength, but felt the tiger drawing ever nearer. The forest ended abruptly at a cliff. As the man was considering whether to throw himself off the cliff rather than let himself be eaten, he noticed a vine growing out of the rock. He grabbed it and lowered himself down the steep face. Clinging to the vine, he heard the tiger pacing above him. Listening more closely, he heard gnawing sounds and looked to see two mice chewing through the vine. Out of the corner of his eye, the man glimpsed a strawberry plant that had taken root on the narrow ledge.

Listening on my ledge, I waited for the improbable self-rescue and prepared an amused smirk for when it came. My friend finished the story: Just as the vine gave way, the man reached out and plucked a single berry from beneath its leaves. It was the sweetest strawberry he had ever tasted.

The ending—the entire story—shocked me, disturbed me. Why a story about a man falling off a cliff, obviously to his death, when we were tethered to vertical rock ourselves? Why give up his life for something so insignificant? I hated the story, but I couldn't forget it, either. For years, it would surface unexpectedly, and I'd try to shake it off.

Reading Thoreau during strawberry season has brought the kōan back to me. "Let us not call it by the mean name of strawberry because in England they spread straw under their garden kinds," he wrote in *Wild Fruits*. "Better call it by the Indian name of heart-berry, for it is indeed a crimson heart which we eat at the beginning of summer to make us brave for all the rest of the year, as Nature is."

The man who wrote that last sentence was not the same man who left Walden. He had been changed by what he had seen, thought about, written, done, and not done in the time after Walden. I have changed, too. Standing there in the meadow with four berries in my hand, remembering the kōan, I laugh. It's all a fall off a cliff. What matters is the strawberry.

Drops of juice from the ripe berries tinge my palm red.

Such a short season, and so sweet.

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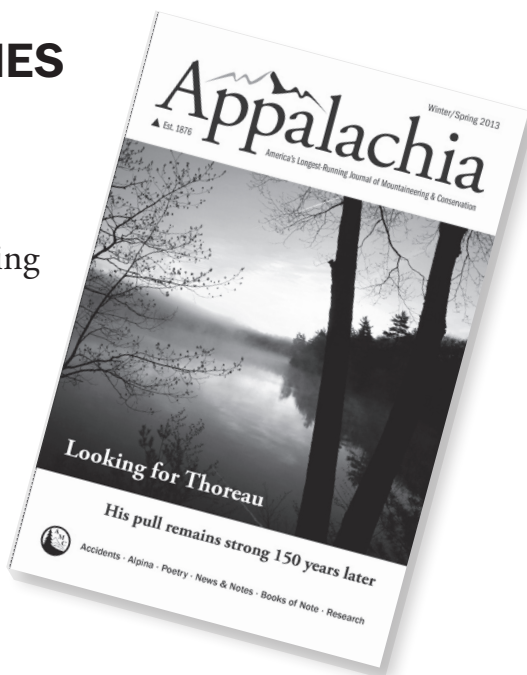
KRISTEN LAINE, who has lived for several years with her family in rural New Hampshire, last wrote for *Appalachia* in Summer/Fall 2010 (LXI no. 2), about motherhood and wildness. She and her family now live part of the year in Seattle.

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