

The Samarae of Thought: Thoreau's Gathered Timescapes

Laura Dassow Walls

Facts collected by a poet are set down at last as winged seeds of truth – samarae – tinged with his expectation. O may my words be verdurous & sempiternal as the hills.
(Henry David Thoreau, *Journal*, 19 June 1852)

When Thoreau died at the untimely age of 44, he left behind two unfinished book manuscripts, *Wild Fruits* and *The Dispersion of Seeds*. In both of them he had been gathering timescapes, distilling and embodying his sense of temporality into the material figurations of the seed. Of the scores of fruit and seed forms that fill these hundreds of pages, some of the most evocative are the samarae, or winged seeds: of elms, whose delicate panicles give the trees a leafy look early in May, well before the leaves have opened; of maples, whose handsome keys ripen at the end of May, when the branches are still bare; pitch pines, whose cones don't ripen until late in the fall and may stay on the tree for many years, their scales regular and closed "like an impenetrable coat of mail" while they age from leather brown to weathered gray (*Wild Fruits* 227). "Within this strong, prickly, and pitchy chest," Thoreau writes of the pitch pine cone, "are contained about a hundred dark brown seeds in pairs, each pair occupying a separate apartment behind its prickly shield. A very thin membrane of wing about three-fourths of an inch long extends from one end of each seed, which it clasps in its divided extremity like a caged bird holding the seed in its bill and waiting till it shall be released that it may fly away with and plant it" (263). The wings of seeds have agency. They

will catch the wind, lift and carry the seed – like a bird or, as he says of maple keys, “like green moths ready to bear off their seeds” (9). Thoreau’s wings and seeds act together, like words and paper, to carry life up and outward on the wind, far out into the world.

What Thoreau finds most extraordinary is the presence of the wind already there, packed deep into the cone’s tight-closed and pitchy chest: “For already some rumor of the wind has penetrated to this cell, and preparation has been made to meet and use it,” he wrote. As he added, “According to Darwin, Alphonse De Candolle has remarked that winged seeds are never found in fruits which do not open. They were designed for flight. This wing is so independent of the seed that you can take the latter out and spring it in again as you do a watch crystal” (*Wild Fruits* 263). The flight the wings were designed for – each variety of seed in a different way, to take hold of a different kind of wind – will carry seeds everywhere, to ground, to water, to the bills of birds who will not carry but eat them. Most seeds will not find themselves on ground in which they can germinate. But some will: most maple keys, for instance, will land on grassy fields and fail, but should a farmer happen to plow the field, those seeds will catch hold of the soil, germinate, and grow. If the field is not plowed again, or browsed upon by cattle, the farmer will return to find it transfigured into a young maple wood.

All this is, of course, strictly and materially “fact.” But the power of Thoreau’s late writing lies in the way that every “fact” doubles in meaning, so that every sentence is freighted with metaphor, with concern. His winged seeds are one, only one, single node on an immense Indra’s net of material metaphors which catch up in its meshes the ecology of Thoreau’s world, which turn his mind inside-out, embodying his extended mind in the details of Concord’s material ecology. Multiply these nodes, as Thoreau did in the virtually infinite pages of his daily Journal entries, and the net catches up in its meshes not only Thoreau’s world but all the worlds that come before and all that come after, including our own. For what Thoreau has been working on, his life’s project, is suggested when he directs our attention to the presence of the wind in the deep, dark, silent

cell of the pinecone: seed and wing, clasped together in coiled spring, anticipate the ripening of the cone and the opening of their cell. They anticipate the strong winds that will set them free, they anticipate the bright pasture where they can take root and spring up into the light. All things anticipate: time lies coiled in that seed, all history and all futurity.

My question at this moment is, How does Thoreau reach this point, where he can load the smallest material fact with meaning, layers of meaning that never seem imposed from without but blaze up from within, as if all things at every moment proclaim the wholeness of their being to all time? Before time can be gathered, time must be shattered. Time broke in two for Henry Thoreau at 2:00 in the afternoon on 11 January 1842. That was the moment when his brother John died in Henry's arms. Henry, then 24 years old, had grown up with John, two years his elder, and the two had been inseparable, the closest of friends and the dearest of rivals. John was outgoing, athletic, charismatic. Everyone thought it was he, not Henry, who would make a mark on the world. He lit up the room, held audiences spellbound with his stories, was the leader in games and a natural teacher, adored by his students. And yet he was also loyal and loving to his shy and introverted younger brother. John was devoted to the outdoors, to hunting and hiking and boating on the rivers, and his special love was birds. The bookish Henry went along, and out in the wild, John became Henry's first teacher. But on New Year's Day, 1842, John nicked his finger on a razorblade. He wrapped the wound with a rag and thought nothing of it until a week later when he felt strange pains throughout his body; the family called Henry, then living with the Emersons, home. For four days Henry nursed John through the terrifying full-body convulsions of lockjaw, or tetanus, until his death; even today, there is no cure for the neurotoxins released into the body by the tetanus bacteria. Afterward Henry closed up into a strange calm, until he, too, gave way to convulsions. The family thought he, too, was infected, and prepared to bury their second son. But Henry slowly recovered, though for another month he could not get out of bed or leave his room. All that spring Emerson worried that Henry was too weak even to garden – though he did

recover in time to help plant the garden at the Old Manse, his wedding gift for Nathaniel and Sophia Hawthorne.

When Henry finally awakened, it was to learn that Waldo Emerson's beloved little boy Waldo Jr., whom Henry had loved and cherished as a son of his own, had also died; his friend Emerson, too, was numb with grief. The double blow left Henry doubly traumatized. As soon as he could bear to pick up a pen, he turned to his Journal to write his way through his desperate sense of vulnerability: "When two approach to meet they incur no petty dangers, but they run terrible risks." Time – or "what we call time" – seemed deranged, as if he couldn't find his way back into the ordinary present. Nor could he find his way back into his own body: "I must confess there is nothing so strange to me as my own body," he wrote; "I love any other piece of nature, almost, better." Yet walking out into nature did not help. It only increased his sense of estrangement: "She always retreats as I advance – Away behind and behind is she and her meaning – [...] I am like a feather floating in the atmosphere, on every side is depth unfathomable." It felt, he thought, as if body and soul were tripping each other up, like unpracticed Siamese twins, tottering along together, too close to walk as one (*Journal 1*, 364-66).

To learn how to "walk as one" required, Thoreau began to realize, something that felt risky and dangerous: opening the body, opening the senses. For Thoreau, this took the form of learning how to listen. The previous fall, in an ambitious but discarded poem sequence on "Inspiration," he had written, "I hearing get who had but ears." Returning to this notion in the wake of John's death, he launched a new poem: "Brother where dost thou dwell?" The poem presses forward a long series of questions: "Where chiefly shall I look/ To feel thy presence near?/ Along the neighboring brook/ May I thy voice still hear?/ [...] / What bird wilt thou employ/ To bring me word of thee?" The birds John so loved become his particular messengers – though the first version of this poem ends in despair. The birds are silent, or he hears them not, does not yet have ears to hear: "They have remained to mourn/ Or else forgot" (*Collected Essays and Poems* 595-96). But in a different version of this

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poem, the ending instead lifts into a hopeful assertion that although he, as always, lags behind his brother, this means he *follows* John, and can continue to follow him into all the places they shared: the woods, the rivers, on the ice:

When on the pond I whirl
In sport, if sport may be,
Now thou art gone,
May I still follow thee?

For then, as now, I trust,
I always lagg'd behind,
While thou wert ever first,
Cutting the wind. (*Collected Poems* 316)

Henry, still struggling to find his poetic voice, imagines a John who, in going before, calls to him from the future, embedded in the presence of all the places that in the past they had loved and shared together. John has become, quite literally, Henry's Muse: Henry opens his first book, *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers* – written as a memorial to John – with the invocation, "Be thou my Muse, my Brother." John is now embodied in all of nature, and it is up to Henry to make ears to hear him, eyes to see him, senses to perceive him, and voice to speak.

The first friend to whom Thoreau could muster the strength to write was Lucy Jackson, Lydian Emerson's sister, to whom he had long been close. "What right have I to grieve," he asked her, "who have not ceased to wonder?" It was this wonder that allowed Thoreau to accept the inhuman onwardness of nature, as the winter ice melted and the birds began to sing nevertheless along the very rivers John had loved. "I do not wish to see John ever again – I mean him who is dead," he told Lucy, but only that "other" John whom he wished to be – the one Henry must now strive to become (*Correspondence* 1, 102). His second letter, to Emerson, was more difficult. At first Thoreau offered his bereft friend the glacial comforts of Transcendentalism: Nature "finds her own again under new forms without loss." But then he took an earthward turn:

“Every blade in the field – every leaf in the forest – lays down its life in its season as beautifully as it was taken up.” It startles to hear so early on this abrupt outcropping of late Thoreau, who in “Autumnal Tints” would anticipate his own death. Here it seems premature, a faith he has yet to earn. To Emerson, his intellectual father – who had feared for his life – Henry must make an avowal of that faith, together with a sincere promise to live up to it: “After I have imagined thus much will not the Gods feel under obligation to make me realize something as good?” (105-6).

Thoreau’s third letter, to his friend Isaiah Williams, confesses that he “could not have done without this experience,” that the harrowing of his soul by John’s death literally made him who he was (*Correspondence 1*, 107). It taught him, for one thing, that the depths of his empathy for others made him terrifyingly vulnerable. He was capable of feeling another’s pain as his own, of suffering beyond endurance. To buffer himself against such shocks, Thoreau erected a barrier against future suffering, which often made him appear closed – as strong, prickly, and pitchy as a pinecone. Emerson remembered Elizabeth Hoar saying, around this time, “I love Henry, but do not like him; and as for taking his arm, I should as soon take the arm of an elm tree” (*Journals 8*:375). Yet Thoreau was far more vulnerable than Emerson realized. To the end of his life, whenever John’s name was mentioned, Henry grew pale and had to leave the room; his empathy with others could be intense enough to literally endanger his balance. This became his greatest weakness, for to guard against it, he shielded himself from other human beings; and his greatest strength, in that it opened him both to intense rage whenever he perceived injustice, and to deep sympathy with all the features and beings in nature, which rang with significance like a struck bell – a significance at once profoundly personal, and universally accessible.

This process can be traced in Thoreau’s Journal: after six weeks of silence, it explodes into a creative frenzy. Gnostic, rambling, prophetic, self-pitying, yearning, and sharply observant by turns, his pages sparkle with raw fragments of themes and ideas that will settle and grow, over

the years to come, into Thoreau's mature voice. His self-awareness that he is at a crossroads, a moment of kairotic time, is profound. To take only one instance, though one with particular significance for the theme of temporality: on 19 March, about a month into this process, Thoreau wrote, "Where ever I go I tread in the tracks of the Indian – I pick up the bolt which he has but just dropped at my feet. And if I consider destiny I am on his trail. I scatter his hearth stones with my feet" – and, Thoreau realized, "[I plant] my corn in the same furrow which yielded its increase to his support so long – I displace some memorial of him" (*Journal 1*, 381). Not long before John's death he had written that a sentence should run "clear through to the end, as deep and fertile as a well drawn furrow" which shows the plough "pressed down to the beam" (359). His sentences are literally to plow and plant the page. Yet here Thoreau remembers that he is no western pioneer breaking virgin soil – he is working old soil, ancient earth plowed and made fertile before by the very people, the "mortal men," whom his own track has not just followed, but displaced. A childhood spent playing Indian with John, looking for Indian artifacts together and imagining themselves as Indian brothers, means that for the rest of his life, John's memory would fuse with the figure of the Indian whom Henry follows – and displaces. Such memories meant there would always be, then, *two* paths opened up at every step: history, and destiny; the memorials he displaced, and the future that the seed corn he planted – corn being an Indian crop, as he well knew – was sowing. "Our eye splits on every object," he wrote, one path to the past, the other to the future: two eternities, perpetually meeting at the present moment. Could he learn to write sentences that would not "displace" the red with the white, the natural with the human, the past with the future? Could he see how even "the new blade of the corn, – the third leaf of the melon" were "not green, but gray and sere with time?" (381). This split does not offer a choice, two alternative paths and the imperative to choose between them, but rather, the imperative *not* to choose. He must honor both at once, see the past always alive in the present, the present always sere in the future.

A week later, Thoreau leaned into the insight:

In me are summer and winter – village life and commercial routine – Pestilence and famine and refreshing breezes – joy and sadness – life & death. How near is yesterday – How far to-morrow! I have seen nails which were driven before I was born. Why do they look old and rusty? – Why does not God make some mistake to show to us that time is a delusion. Why did I invent Time but to destroy it. (*Journal 1*, 392)

We are very near, here, to the voice of *Walden*: “Time is but the stream I go a-fishing in. I drink at it; but while I drink I see the sandy bottom and detect how shallow it is. Its thin current slides away but eternity remains. I would drink deeper; fish in the sky, whose bottom is pebbly with stars” (98). At this moment in spring 1842, Thoreau was on the verge of writing his first major essay, “The Natural History of Massachusetts,” which rehearses the cyclical structure and detailed method of *Walden* toward establishing that “nature” is the path to “health.” Here is an instance of what ecologist Keith Tidball calls “urgent biophilia,” in which humans faced with trauma or disaster seek out contact and engagement with nature to summon and demonstrate resilience: planting a few flowers or a garden, tending trees, rescuing animals, cultivating “restorative environments” (qtd Zolli).¹ To reach *Walden*, the book, Thoreau of course actually did move to Walden, the pond, where he planted his own garden and wrote his first book, *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*, as his memorial to his lost brother John. These two movements – planting the field, and planting the page – are both intensive acts of restorative environing.

In contrast with the cyclical enclosure of *Walden*, which Thoreau began drafting the day after he moved to the pond, *A Week* is Thoreau’s book about time as a stream – not a stream he can see through, but a stream dense enough to bear him up, on which he can launch himself to see where it will bear him. Yet ironically, this book about flowing with the stream of time is notably, and notoriously, fragmented in time, a tissue of

disjunctions between various temporalities and scales: the past with John on the journey out, and the second past of their journey home; the several present moments of writing, some of which reflect on the present futures of earlier pasts and others that look into still deeper, technologized futures of the present; the various deep pasts of colonial and of Indian history, as recorded in written texts and legible on the land itself; the "deep time" of Christian and Hindu scriptures and of various world literatures, as noted by Wai Chee Dimock; the geological past opened to Thoreau by Charles Lyell, as noted by William Rossi. And so on. In short, *A Week* is a restorative effort to gather up all that John's death has shattered. But while time is now gathered all in one place, that hardly means it is unified or fused. The many temporal disjunctions confused its readers and led to the book's failure – yet another death. This one, however, freed Thoreau to complete *Walden*, his second, and widely admired, attempt to fuse temporalities.²

Much more could be said on all this, of course, but to bring this present reading to a close, I turn back to the pitch pine cone to make one final point. The wind that has already penetrated the closed cell of the winged seed is an early figuration of what Thoreau will come to call *anticipation*, as when he writes, in *Walden*, "To anticipate, not the sunrise and the dawn merely, but, if possible, Nature herself!" (17). To *anticipate* combines *ante*, before, with *capere*, to take or contain: so, it means not merely to expect a future that is a continuation of the present, or "the full actualization of tendencies already in existence" (Žižek 134), but something closer to the French word *avenir* – that is, "a-venir," what is to come, the "advent" of a *dis-continuity* with the present, something new, a radical break with what is. When Thoreau writes, in *Walden's* motto, of bragging like the chanticleer to wake his neighbors up, he is anticipating the emergence of something, a hope, a utopian possibility, that lies dormant in the present like the seed tucked away asleep in its hard casing, awaiting the "spring" when it will be freed by sun and wind – an emancipation that is to come, but whose signs are visible *now*, in the present. But these signs are more than merely visible: they will be seen,

will come to make sense, only if one *acts* so as to bring them into being. Hence Thoreau's insistence upon anticipation, which engages the sense of doing, taking hold, or containing what is to come. To "anticipate" is an action that inflects the future, that helps it to realize itself.

In other words, Thoreau in *Walden* looks to kairotic time, the pregnant moment when the future awakes. But it must be seized and acted upon if the future is to be *realized* – if the seed, awakened, is to fly, find its ground, take root and grow. This notion clasps *Walden* in its bill like the watch-coil of winged seeds: "It is true," Thoreau notes near the opening, "I never assisted the sun materially in his rising but, doubt not, it was of the last importance only to be present at it" (17). Here he quietly drops into the furrow of the page the seed that will spring open in his famous closing: "Only that day dawns to which we are awake. There is more day to dawn. The sun is but a morning star" (333). Yes, and *Walden* was but a morning book: there was, or was supposed to have been, more of Thoreau's day to dawn, had he lived. What he should have lived to write was, in *Wild Fruits* and *Dispersion of Seeds*, the gathering of all times, their dispersion on the winds, and their regathering in the fertile soils, inscribing an evolutionary process rich with the utopian advent of newness – an evolution that was, as Thoreau said of Darwin's theory, not the continuation or unfolding of tendencies fixed in the present, but "a constant *new* creation," the constant regathering of all time into the seed (*Journal* XIV:147). Within it is coiled the constant hope – the conditional hope, for like the rising of the sun, does it not depend upon our being fully *present*? – the constant and conditional hope in the coming of the spring.

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Notes

¹ See also Keith G. Tidball, "Urgent Biophilia: Human-Nature Interactions and Biological Attractions in Disaster Resilience," *Ecology and Society*, Vol. 17, No. 2 (2012), <http://www.ecologyandsociety.org/vol17/iss2/art5/>. Tidball writes that "the affinity we humans have for the rest of nature, the process of remembering that affinity and the urge to express it through

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creation of restorative environments, which may also restore or increase ecological function, may confer resilience across multiple scales. Through this expression [...] we may find important insights into the value of human-nature interactions beyond those that become highly visible in hazard, disaster, and vulnerability contexts." Tidball defines such "greening" activities as "an active and integrated approach to the appreciation, stewardship, and management of living elements of social-ecological systems" (5).

² Lloyd Pratt observes that the literature of modernity (he speaks specifically of the Transcendentalists) "pluralized time. It did not purify it." Pratt focuses on such genres as African American life writing, which like the life-writing of *A Week*, also "functions as an archive of temporalities drawn from moments other than its own – temporalities that it returns to the present." In particular, the technologies of modernization – the railroad, and the standard clock-time that accompanied the railroad – did not connect or homogenize time but disconnected and pluralized it. See *Archives of American Time: Literature and Modernity in the Nineteenth Century* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010), 5, 15, 89. Pratt's invocation of Pheng Cheah is especially pertinent here: "Cheah calls for an immanent humanism in which what is best for all humanity can only emerge from *what already is* – from the complex of what is given. Here the human emerges from an engagement with the full conditions of difference that define a given moment" – or, "heterochronic disturbances" (190-91). This is both an outstanding gloss on Thoreau's *Journal*, and a profoundly Darwinian observation.

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