

Midlife with Thoreau: Living, Loving, and Loss in The New Hampshire Woods

M*idlife with Thoreau* (Hiraeth, 2015) was written over several years and in several genres as a nature journal with some resemblance and many references to Henry David Thoreau's *Walden*, or *Life in the Woods*, published in 1855. Published 110 years later, it is a memoir in poetry, essays, and journals, a series of "excursions" (the term comes from Thoreau)--that is, walks through landscapes of association, beginning often with observed phenomenon and moving to its personal meaning for me, a mode characteristic of many modern so-called "nature writers," as co-editors of the *Norton Book of Nature Writing*, Robert Finch and John Elder, report. The book is a blend of sources and genres, disciplines, and the "embodied" personal and the political that has ever been the stuff of my academic work before and after I came to the University of New Hampshire, where I regularly teach a variety of courses in nature writing (last spring: *Literature of the Cabin in the Woods*), recent memoir, poetry, and literature by women.

I borrow many of Thoreau's key phrases as I write much more obviously personally than he did, my subjects environmental landscapes, activism, and animals; language, literature, teaching; gardens, pond, and woods; accidents, illness, family, divorce, depression, death, dating, and dogs. And, as the following poems show, I am not always solo in my own cabin in the Durham woods.



Mendum's Pond, Durham, NH (courtesy of Diane Freedman)

Mary Spock Freedman

Yellow pine pollen coats pond and porch.
Peonies perform and perfume
where the grass sward stretches
and dogwoods bloom on each end.

Darwin and I are gardening,
he, rolling on his back, taking sips
from the hose,
I wondering what to do for the rose,
deadheading rhododendrons,
propping the hollyhocks,
coaxing the clematis,
cutting back the forsythia.
Doused by the sprinkler,
thinking pink,
thinking Mother
gone now one week--
she who will never again
rise or coax
or prop or kiss, or drink.

Sustainability Briefings are a collection of occasional essays, thought pieces, case studies and research briefings through which University of New Hampshire (UNH) faculty, staff and students can connect with larger audiences on the complex issues of sustainability. The collection is sponsored by the Sustainability Institute at UNH, a convener, cultivator and champion of sustainability on campus, in the state and region, and around the world. Learn more at www.sustainableunh.unh.edu.

Breakfast Poem

I want breakfast
but I can wait
to see first the rain spattering the pool
the otters made in the ice
on the pond that leads to the woods
where the barred owl sits.
My son oversleeps
and I should go for the paper
but I study the grey brown of the oaks,
the lichen climbing up the trunks
I see out south and west windows.
Here, in winter,
a small fog lifts from the frozen river
of early morning.

Yesterday, two toads sat sentry
by the side garden
where I planted begonias
in the rain.

I forgot to tell you.

Today, three painted turtles
equally spaced on the driveway
mounted the rock garden
to lay eggs in the sand.

The world whirls. Spring
unfurls its floral flags:
Korean lilac, double-file viburnum,
English rhodora, tree peony,
weigela, andromeda.

I must tell you now,
how, in these mere three weeks,
you have found (sown, mown)
the garden
in me.

The first full piece of the book takes inspiration from Robert Frost as well as Thoreau, thus from two fellow New Englanders. It is titled “Whose Woods These Are”: Saving Landscapes,” and it suggests the need for activists to save local landscapes while it is

these landscapes in the end that “save” and “solace” those of us blessed to be able to spend time in them. This first piece weaves in poetry, including my own, with words from poets such as William Blake, Gary Snyder, Elizabeth Bishop, and Adrienne Rich as well as Thoreau. In it I write:

Though I greet the woods each day, by any modern definition I am not a true scholar of nature—that is, not a biologist or ornithologist, not a forestry expert, not an “outdoor recreation” teacher. But as a scholar and teacher of American literature, I am an “American Scholar,” in Emerson’s phrase, and an inheritor and admirer of Thoreau and Whitman and other nature writers whose work blends literature and observation, science and philosophy, natural and personal history.

The rest of this new book alternates autobiographically-inflected essays about the “nature” of academic life (“Uproot-Transplant-Adapt: The Green Hills of Academia”) and the sustaining role of time with dogs and in nature (“Dog as Divining Rod: the Best is Yet to Come”) with lyric poems and (humorous or lyrical) journals on “Love of Nature,” “The Nature of Love,” and the nature of loss and uplift -- followed by an update on it all.



Diane Freedman (courtesy of Diane Freedman)

Author

Diane P. Freedman is Professor of English and core faculty member in Women’s Studies. She received her Ph.D. from the University of Washington, an M.A. in creative writing from Boston University, and an M.A. in Teaching and a A.B. in English from Cornell University. She is the author or editor of numerous books: *Midlife with Thoreau: Poems, Essays, Journals* (Hiraethpress.com), *An Alchemy of Genres: Cross Genre Writing by American Feminist Poet Critics*, *The Intimate Critique: Autobiographical Literary Criticism*, *Autobiographical Writing across the Curriculum*, *The Teacher’s Body: Embodiment, Authority, and Identity in the Academy*, and *Millay at 100: A Critical Reappraisal*. Future projects include working on a sequel to *Midlife with Thoreau* and teaching “Environmental Poetry” (spring 2016).