Midlife 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.

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.
Breakfast Poem

I want breakfast
but I can wait
for 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 mod-
er definition I am not a true scholar of nature–
that is, not a biologist or ornithologist, not a for-
estry expert, not an “outdoor recreation” teacher.
But as a scholar and teacher of American liter-
ature, 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 autobi-
ographically-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 Divin-
ing Rod: the Best is Yet to Come”) with lyric po-
ems 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)