

By Robin Coste Lewis

“Inhabitants and Visitors”

NOTE: In 1854, Thoreau published his now canonical *Walden: Or, Life in the Woods*. Well-regarded for its exploration of nineteenth-century subsistence living, Thoreau also included a chapter that explored the community of free Blacks living around Walden Pond long before he arrived. He titled this chapter “Former Inhabitants and Winter Visitors.” My poem below is an erasure of Thoreau’s chapter. Like Walden at the time of Thoreau’s experiment, for me this chapter contained a hidden call to the historical rediscovery of African American histories embroidering Concord, and hence, America. Therefore, in order to extend Thoreau’s experiment, I removed and rearranged several lines from Thoreau’s chapter in order to magnify, lyrically, the free black community that once lived there.

*In honor of the opening of
The National Museum of African American History and Culture*

and

*Dedicated to Kevin Young,
with profound admiration,
on the occasion of being named Director of
the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture*

My fireside,
 My darkline,
 My border-dotted
 dwelling.

My own alone,
 My firm open,
 My across the road,
 My gentle permission.

My narrow present
 half-obliterated fringe
 of now—
 golden, luxuriant.

My still-shrill war
 dwelling on parole—
 Inhumane bricks amid
 the oak copse there.

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My discolored emphasis—black,
blacker than any dusky orb,
before or since
My orchard of location.

My-thology
(Prominent. Astounding.)
My biography
(robs and murders

the whole history
enacted here).
Let Time intervene
the most distinct and dubious tradition

Saluted—
standing—
unoccupied
election.

My labored lethargy, awake,
My poetry skipping,
My bells rung in hot haste.
Engines fire all together. Fresh sparks.

My ever and anon,
My cooled ardor
thought concluded.
Speaking trumpets,

Passage in the preface,
The soul's only survivor.
Heir of burning first moments.
My gaze, my always, remembered absolutely.

My mere presence,
My dark heaven,
which could never be burned
or mounted.

The iron hook
hangs history
(Once more
on the left).

My earthen descendants,
My sufferance,
My vain form.
Midsummer Man carrying a load—

My inquired concern,
A potter's wheel of him,
Clay and wheel scripture—
An art ever-practiced.

Last inhabitants
of these woods
before me,
Names with coil,

Civil speech carmine,
curled up by use—
The last symbol a dim garden over-run
with Roman beggar-ticks.

My dent in the earth,
This site
These dwellings:
buried cellar stones—

and strawberries,
thimble-berries,
hazel-bush,
chimney nook,

Sweet-scented black waves
where the door was sometimes
the well
Visible.

Fate, free-will, fore-
knowledge absolute. Form
and dialect
edifying as philosophy.

My vivacious
lilac generation,
the door and lintel and sill
are unfolding.

Plucked by the traveller,
tended by children
in front-yard plots
now standing.

Lone century
universally thirsty
making the wilderness
blossom like the rose:

*Deliver me from a city
built on the site of a more ancient city
whose materials are ruins,
whose gardens cemeteries.*

My season
My wanderer
My house for a week

or a fortnight at a time
My great snow of 1717
 My long time buried
 without food
 My hole, which the chimney's breath made in the drift.

My house,
 My meandering dotted line,
 Same number of steps, same length,
 coming and going.

My own deep tracks,
 Heaven's own blue,
 My deepest appointment,
 My plainly erect neck.

Feathers, lids, winged brother
 of the peninsular relation,
 My nearer approach.
 Impatient

Delicate twilight,
 New perch,
 Peace smitten on one cheek—
 notwithstanding the odor of morale

(Church or State haul
 Load of manure
 Large fires
 Clear when others failed).

My darkness, my lamp
 through the trees, like the nut its kernel.
 Unsuspected faith,
 God of Defaced and Leaning Monuments.

Enter ye
 O World behind us
 Pledge no institution
 whichever way we turn

Blue-robed roof, Mother of pearl flocks,
 form and dissolve the fable, every
 circular inch. Open its seams.
 Long to be remembered.

Expect the Visitor who never comes.
 Say, "Remain at eventide,
 as long as it takes, long enough
 to milk a whole herd of cows."

The Mark of Elision

After Elise Lemire's *Black Walden*

Captain John Codman's slave, Mark, had poisoned him. The judge of Concord could not discern the reason why Phillis, when asked how long she had served Codman, said he'd purchased her when she was a little girl. She says nothing more about who held her close before this.

In April 1740, William Wilson of Concord sold to Sarah Melvin of Concord a two year-old "negro girl" named Nancy.

In April 1752, farmer Henry Spring of Weston sold to Peter Hubbard of Concord a six-ish year-old boy named Cato.

Judge Russell himself had taken one of his slave women's children to Timothy Wesson, who in turn had given Brister to John Cuming, of Concord.

Such was the season, the spring yields of the region.

Common as rye.

Plentiful as air.

But poison?

Nothing could explain it.

Belinda remembered life on the Rio da Valta, where "mountains covered the spicy forests," and she was snatched from a sacred grove where she and her parents performed their devotions. The intruders wrenched her away. Yet after seventy years enslaved at the Royall estate in Charlestown, MA, Ghana never faded from her mind.

Robin Vassall was born to enslaved people on the Royall estate. He, his mother, and his five siblings were inherited by Penelope Royall when Isaac Royall, her father died. The bonds of one family rent those of another. Penelope Royall married a Jamaican planter living in Cambridge, taking Robin, his mother and siblings with her, but leaving behind, with Isaac Royall Jr., eighteen other people who were his inheritance, including Robin's father. Robin's portal to the Lyceum: arsenic. Spirited from a doctor's cache.

Mark was separated from his wife and children in Boston, at the end of February, before spring could even arrive. He remembered his abduction from his country. He remembered his infant son given away to a family in another county. The wrongs against him, against any of them, evidence of nothing at all. Meeting Robin behind a house, under cover of darkness, Mark obtained a packet of poison to end John Codman's tyranny.

As whole families of enslaved and free Black people in this region died of disease born of malnutrition.

Nothing could explain the slaves' plot to burn an entire city of plantations in Antigua, which the Royall, Vassall and other planter families fled to New England to escape. They ran from it, but were still in it. Were the "it" itself and couldn't see it. What their legacy and all it entailed was dependent upon, was nothing without.

Nothing could explain the desperation of slaves. Family was the domain of ownership, the naming of that ownership the classic mark of educated gentlemen. Phoebe. Venus. Phyllis. Cato. Maro. The classical nature of love and deprivation. Their own —whose?—to mourn and to burn.

Walden Woods

Turn and you will see Brister Freeman
self-styled *man of color* in a field he owns
as he plants the seeds of apple trees that bear

fruit, wild and tart. His wife Fenda nearby
suggests with her name a cleaving, a cracking
open, but repairs the world with the telling

of fantastical fortunes. Thoreau tells us she is
fat and *blacker than any of the children of night*,
that *such a dusky orb as never rose on Concord*

before or since. He is divining, clearly, slipping
backward through time to bring us an image
of those who have lived as he will live:

Bound by the law and beyond bondage.
Facing the woods' twin torments—persistence
and sense, the gods of modest circumstances.

Defiant. Original.

Later and returned to civilized life, Thoreau
will write *some have asked what I got to eat*
in the woods; *if I did not feel lonesome;*

if I was not afraid.

Let's return now to the woods, its small cluster
of outcasts, to the field. See Brister Freeman
self-freed by a war that has fashioned a country.

See him move to slave now in a slaughterhouse,
its meat packed and shipped to the West Indies.
Now in a matrix that will harbor the mills

of a million pounds of cotton fed them
by the far-off plantations of the new nation's
South. In the massive circle of profit and appetite

lashing Concord to the ports of the Caribbean,
Concord to the West African coast seething
with barracoons, pens that unmake men,

that strip the names of women from their lips.
See Brister Freeman make up his mind and say:
Land. Land as the greatest god. As the freer of us.
Land at all costs.

A Frieze for Trayvon Martin

Because the night has no
 number, because
the thunder doesn't
 mean rain
Because maybe
 Because we must
say your names
 & the list grows
longer & more
 endless
I am writing this:
 you are no gun
nor holster, no
 finger aimed, thumb
a hammer cocked
 back, all the way—
I refuse
 to bury you, to inter
your name in earth,
 or to burn you back
to bone, to what
 we all know, the soft
song of your skull
 as a child, the place
God or your mother
 or same thing
left untouched
 by hands—
that halo whole
 till they said you weren't—
that Death
 could be your breath—
could be a body
 or less—& you
grew more black
 & blue.
I refuse
 to watch. I refuse.
Not guilty. Not
 guilty. I know you
will stay & rise
 like the sea—
the tide
 all salt & shifting.
Don't ever leave.

Notes

"A Frieze for Trayvon Martin" is for him and other contemporary victims of police violence and vigilante justice.

God wills us free, man wills us slaves.
I will as God wills Gods will be done
Here lies the body of John Jack,
A native of Africa who died
March 1773 aged about 60 years
Tho' born in a land of slavery.
He was born free.
Tho' he lived in a land of liberty.
He lived a slave.
Till by his honest tho' stolen labors.
He acquired the source of slavery.
Which gave him his freedom:
Tho' not long before,
Death the grand tyrant.
Gave him his final emancipation,
And set him on a footing with kings.
Tho' a slave to vice.
He practised those virtues
Without which kings are but slaves.