

To Henry Thoreau at the Autumnal Equinox

by Charles Semones

And so, Henry, kinsman of my spirit, you've been gone since early May of a year I was not here to see. They tell me it was right at nine o'clock in the morning when you took your leave. The earliest apple trees were leafing and greening as they'd been doing on that day every year. Still do. Strange how that happens. It's always baffled me. Most of the villagers, when they heard the news, went about the streets in mourning, even though they'd never known what to make of you. Your closest friends conversed, agreed it was the seemingly thing to do, and threw you a funeral at the church, it mattering not to them you'd never entered it. Lordly Mr. Emerson delivered himself of such a eulogy that doubtless bowed the angels down with grief. Truth is, he *pontificated* the afternoon away. Some folks squirmed more than they were wont to at Sunday meeting. It was the hard pews got to them. They meant no disrespect to you. You would not have faulted them for trying to relieve their aching backsides. Besides, by that time, you were out of range, and couldn't hear your best friend send you off with such a plethora of verbal flourishes. You'd no doubt reached some cosmic destination. It's likely that this little village was the last thing on your mind. Other precincts of the universe had already sat you down to supper. Though never much for talking when you were alive, it's possible you regaled those folks with an account of how you put gloves on Lidian's chickens. And I'd guess someone asked about the night you set Concord on its ear by going to jail rather than paying taxes to help finance a war you found uncalled-for and immoral.

Down here, Henry, a single clocktick has just let another summer go. It's fall again. Surely you remember how you loved the tang and tree-shine of our New England autumns. But you loved spring and summer too—the seasons of growing things and the manner of their growing. I still think the piece you wrote about wild apples is among your best. It took nature's own apostle to write such as that. If you were to return here—a youthful revenant—you'd find no decent wildflowers in the fields surrounding Concord for Louisa and your Aunt Sophia. Toward the end of August, most everything except the pesky weeds gets sickly-looking and, in no time, looks withered as a mummy. If you remember, that's the way it is each year when the end-of-summer light begins to look far-flung and starts subsiding. And there's a keening sound, sad as any funeral hymn, that makes us think the dead are calling out to us. But it's only the wind, nothing but the hot late-summer grieving of the wind. If the weather keeps in sync with how it's been in other years, we'll get a killing frost by mid-October. By the way, Walden Pond's a mess. It would sicken you to see it. The summer tourists took their toll, but meant no harm. Now it's been defiled by all sorts of vagrants, malcontents, and scoundrels claiming to be your *disciples*. Horse feathers! If you ask me, they're everything *but*. The place has been muddled by discarded reefer-wrappers, rock concert tickets torn in half, crunched-up beer cans and soggy condoms.

Now I have to ask you if anywhere in that galactic thicket, flowering with stars, you've met with what Mr. Emerson calls the Universal Mind, the Oversoul, the great I AM? And if so, were you chastised soundly for not showing much concernment for your soul when you were traipsing through the woods alone and exploring rivers with your brother, John, instead of studying the Holy Writ? Being the way he is, Mr. Emerson would want to know, not that it would matter much to him. He pretty much abandoned that when he left the pulpit. Now he and Bronson Alcott and Alcott's brainy daughter get together and have such conversations that would befuddle minor gods. Lidian, having little interest in what they're saying, keeps mainly to herself. She knows her husband's intellect takes precedence, and it's the new idea he's yet to have that he values above most people, and that includes her. Did you know he thought of *you* as his only equal, and that he loved you as much as one man can love another man, though he never told you?

Sound carries farther and more clearly on these autumn nights. So we should hear your footfalls when you climb the icy altitudes past Orion to worlds undreamt-of that Hubble, voyaging alone, is apt to see close up. A poet from the century past wrote words I'll share with you. He said, "It is the human season on this sterile air." I think the human season rids the heart of its debris. I do not think you'll disagree.

Note: The words in quotation marks are from "Immortal Autumn" by Archibald MacLeish.