

*To Ralph Waldo Emerson**March 11, 1842*Concord March 11<sup>th</sup> 1842

Dear Friend,

I see so many "carvels ticht, fast tending throw the sea" to your El Dorado, that I am in haste to plant my flag in season on that distant beach, in the name of God and king Henry.<sup>1</sup> There seems to be no occasion why I who have so little to say to you here at home should take pains to send you any of my silence in a letter-<sup>2</sup> Yet since no correspondence can hope to rise above the level of those homely<sup>a</sup> speechless hours, as no spring ever bursts above the level of the still mountain tarn whence it issued-I will not delay to send a venture. As if I were to send you a piece of the house-sill-or a loose casement rather. Do not neighbors sometimes halloo with good will across a field, who yet never chat over a fence?

The sun has just burst through the fog, and I hear blue-birds,<sup>a</sup> song-sparrows, larks, and robins, down in the meadow. The other day I walked in the woods, but found myself rather denaturalized by late habits.<sup>3</sup> Yet it is the same nature that Burns and Wordsworth loved-the same life that Shakspeare and Milton lived. The wind still roars in the wood, as if nothing had happened out of the course of nature. The sound of the waterfall is not interrupted more than if a feather had fallen.

Nature is not ruffled by the rudest blast- The hurricane only snaps a few twigs in some nook of the forest. The snow attains its average depth each winter, and the chic-a-dee lisps the same notes. The old laws prevail in spite of pestilence and famine. No genius or virtue so rare & revolutionary appears in town or village, that the pine ceases to exude resin in the wood, or beast or bird lays aside its habits.

How plain that death is only the phenomenon of the individual or class- Nature does not recognise it, She finds

her own again under new forms without loss. Yet death is beautiful when seen to be a law, and not an accident— It is as common as life. Men die in Tartary—in Ethiopia—in England—in Wisconsin. And after all what portion of this so serene and living nature can be said to be alive? Do this year's grasses and foliage outnumber all the past. 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 is the past-time of a full quarter of the year. Dead trees—sere leaves—dried grass and herbs—are not these a good part of our life? And what is that pride of our autumnal scenery but the hectic flush—the sallow and cadaverous countenance of vegetation—its painted throes—with the November air for canvass—

When we look over the fields we are not saddened because these particular flowers or grasses will wither—for the law of their death is the law of new life. Will not the land be in good heart *because* the crops die down from year to year? The herbage cheerfully consents to bloom, and wither, and give place to a new.

So is it with the human plant. We are partial and selfish when we lament the death of the individual, unless our plaint be a paean to the departed soul, and we sigh as the wind sighs over the fields, which no shrub interprets into its private grief.

One might as well go into mourning for every sere leaf—but the more innocent and wiser soul will snuff a fragrance in the gales of autumn, and congratulate nature upon her health.

After I have imagined thus much will not the Gods feel under obligations to make me realize something as good?

I have just read some good verse by the old Scotch poet John Bellenden—

“The fynest gold or silver that we se,  
 May nocht be wrocht to our utilitie,  
 Bot flammis kein & bitter violence;

The more distress, the more intelligence.  
 Quhay sailis lang in hie prosperitie,  
 Ar sone owreset be stormis without defence."<sup>4</sup>

From your friend  
 Henry D. Thoreau

*Correspondent:* See p. 53.

<sup>1</sup> T quotes John Bellenden, "Allegorie of Vertue and Delyte," in *Chronicle of Scottish Poetry*, 2:56. T borrowed volume 2 from the Harvard College Library in 1837, and he borrowed all four volumes of the collection in 1841. By using Bellenden's ship and El Dorado images, T implies that many letters sail from New England to New York City, Emerson's El Dorado, the place where he made money as a lecturer.

<sup>2</sup> Emerson arrived in New York City on February 25, delivered his six-lecture series "The Times" between March 3 and March 14, and returned to Concord on March 18.

<sup>3</sup> See p. 103, note 4.

<sup>4</sup> John Bellenden, "Allegorie of Vertue and Delyte," 2:55.

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*Editor's Note*

This letter is addressed "R. W. Emerson / New York." and endorsed "H. D. Thoreau / March 1842".

*Author's Alterations*

homely] *followed by cancelled* but  
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*To Isaiah Thornton Williams*

*March 14, 1842*

Concord March 14<sup>th</sup> 1842

Dear Williams,

I meant to write to you before but John's death, and my own sickness, with other circumstances, prevented. John died of the lock-jaw, as you know, Jan. 11<sup>th</sup> I have been