A Trout in the Milk by James William Brown

**EVERYONE KNEW THAT** Henry was dying. The little cane bed he had used in his cabin beside Walden Pond was now installed in the downstairs parlor, and he’d lain there for months, propped up by pillows, receiving friends and neighbors. There’d been much talk among them lately of the battle recently fought at Pittsburgh Landing, near Shiloh Church. Immense losses, more than twenty thousand, it was said, of Confederate and Union troops together. Three were from Concord alone, including the Davis boy from nearby Boston Road.

But Henry had little interest in war news. His eyes glittered brilliantly now, and his cheeks were flushed. In the presence of visitors, he’d been able to control the spasmodic coughing that sometimes led to hemorrhaging. Only his sister, Sophia, knew how advanced the tuberculosis, complicated by pleurisy, had become. She and the housemaid, Elsie, tended to the endless washing of the bloody linen, it being too much for either of them alone.

Too weak to write on this May morning, Henry was dictating a note to Sophia. It was for Edward, Emerson’s son, who would soon make a trip west to the Rocky Mountains. “Carry an arrowhead with you,” Henry said slowly, his eyes closed, “and try to find out how the Indians make them.” He paused, struggled silently to control a cough starting to rumble through his chest like an approaching thunderstorm, then went on in spurts. “Seek out moose and elk . . . learn their secrets of . . . majesty. Believe in the forest . . . and in the meadow and in the night . . . in which the corn grows.”

Sophia had heard much of this before. He’d read out his new essay, “Walking,” before sending it off to the *Atlantic Monthly* the previous month. What she noted now was that he spoke the lines feverishly, and somewhat out of order, as if they had just at that moment come to him. He did not appear to realize he was quoting himself.

“The African hunter, Cumming,” he went on, “tells us that . . . the skin of the eland . . . as well as that of most other antelopes just killed . . . emits the most delicious perfume . . . of trees and grass.”

He paused. Sophia waited. Henry sat silent, eyes still closed. After a while, she asked if he’d noticed the beauty of the day outside the window. “The early violets are blooming beside the steps. And there are little green shoots on the apple trees.” Henry looked toward the window and seemed to study it, then turned back.

“I cannot see on the outside at all.”

Alarmed, Sophia asked, “Can you see me?”

“A little.”

Should she send Elsie for the doctor? But he’d already told her that there was nothing more to be done, aside from keeping him as comfortable as possible. Distract him, he’d advised. But how was it possible to distract a person from his own end? He sat in bed day after day, fully aware he was dying but making as little fuss as possible, just slowly getting on with his work. He was growing more serene, she thought, and in his paleness, almost translucent, even rather beautiful. Of course, some of this would be due to the tincture of laudanum, which the doctor supplied and which she mixed with water for him to drink each night. It would help him to rest, the doctor said. Henry did indeed seem peaceful. When a tactless visitor asked how the “distant shore of the other side” appeared to him, he answered, “One world at a time, please.”

There had been so many visitors at the door, and of course she couldn’t allow them all to see him. Some knew him solely through his writings or had met him years earlier. But they wished to pay their respects. The day before, there’d been that little man with the huge ginger mustache gone mostly white. He’d stood in the doorway—very roughly dressed, he was—and said he’d known Mr. Thoreau in his Walden days, that was all. He’d turned away when she’d said Henry was resting, and only then did she notice the tears on his cheeks. Well, so many people felt that way about Henry, even those who’d never so much as met him. It was really very moving, the way they kept turning up. She felt for them, but what could she do?

Should she tell Henry about Ellen? This was the nagging question. She’d been struggling over it, worrying that it might shock him in his weakened condition to hear her name once more. But so many years had passed; wouldn’t he be beyond all that? At least it would be a distraction.

“Ellen Sewell has written to inquire after you,” she said. “She’s heard that you’re still unwell and asked to be remembered to you.”

There was a swift intake of breath from Henry. He closed his eyes and felt himself going a long way back through many rooms, doors opening on other doors in all the rooms of his life until he found her, standing against the mantel in the drawing room of the old house, in a pale yellow dress with a tortoiseshell comb in her hair.

“Oh, Henry,” she said, “there you are. We’ve all been waiting for you.”

Never before had a woman made him feel, as she often did, that without him nothing could possibly take place. But how strange the room looked now, all slanted and the walls drifting and wavering, as if underwater. And he appeared to be swimming in the air of the room, floating over Ellen, wondering how old she’d been that summer, seventeen perhaps? With her perfect Roman nose and wide-set green eyes, standing there laughing and careless as if she didn’t know that both he and his brother, John, had already given their hearts to her.

And yes, there was John too, sitting on the piano stool and laughing with the others in the room. John! It tore his heart to see him again—dear, dear John—but who was it they had buried in the Thoreau plot if not John? What a muddle! Was there no getting to the bottom of anything in life, not to mention death? Where precisely was Death anyway? He’d been searching for him for a long time, but just when the knock at the door came, it turned out to be only a man with a large mustache, asking after his health. And what should one look for, really? The Old Testament hooded figure with scythe? Or someone else entirely? He guessed that Death was probably a much more familiar presence, someone you’d hardly notice in a shop or on the street. Well, it was certainly annoying enough the way one was kept waiting.

Yet here John was, at least, alive and laughing, though he too now appeared to be swimming, or drifting rather, on the piano stool, and in Henry’s direction. They both looked down at Ellen. How well he knew that chestnut hair, the feeling of Ellen’s scalp. He’d just finished examining her cranium for telltale bumps. That was the summer when everyone had been fascinated by phrenology. It was all nonsense, of course, the theories of that Englishman, what was his name? No one actually believed that protuberances on the scalp were clues to inner character traits. But everyone enjoyed the possibility of belief.

Suddenly he found himself beside Ellen, just as he had been that evening. But his throat had dried up completely. He felt it acutely now, for he was both in himself and outside himself, watching. And he was somehow Ellen too and even John. How natural it was to flow in and out like this, as if everyone were liquid. Still, his throat had regularly gone dry around Ellen. By the end of the first day of her visit from Scituate to Concord, he’d understood that she was completely unlike the Concord girls who so tired him with their irksome chatter and gossip. They seemed altogether devoid of brains, and their society was utterly unprofitable. When it was impossible to avoid them, he felt himself growing dour and stiff with disinterest. It was clear that they sensed this and turned from him to John, leaving him isolated among them, angry both at their dullness and his own lack of civility.

Oh, why couldn’t he be more like John, who was now descending on his piano stool toward him and Ellen? John would do anything to make others smile and come together.

“Well, dear brother,” John said, next to him, “what evidence have you found on this young lady’s cranium?”

Drawing himself up, Henry said, “Ellen Sewell has no bumps on her head whatsoever.”

Everyone in the room laughed, and he noticed for the first time that they were all there—the cousins, the Lowell twins, Aunt Pru, Judge Lockwood. “But you know what that means, Henry?” John asked. “She’s either a genius or an imbecile. Well, which is it to be, Henry?”

“Only I can settle the question,” Ellen said, also laughing.

“No, no. Henry must say.”

“Genius, of course,” Henry said. “Ellen has a genius for friendship.”

“Oh, dear,” Ellen said, “how very kind of you to say so. But I’m a great imbecile in comparison to you Thoreau brothers. That is most certain.”

Not true, of course, Henry knew even then. Ellen had come a long way from the rigid views of her Unitarian family. He’d discussed them with her in detail during their walks with Aunt Pru as chaperone. In the end she seemed to grasp with ease the transcendentalist view of Mr. Emerson.

“Father would never agree,” Ellen had said. “But I do think it true, as do you, I believe, that man has an innate body of knowledge which transcends the senses.”

“And it is this that we call the voice of God,” he’d said.

“Just so.”

But then he was disturbed when Ellen had invited him to accompany her to church, which she referred to as “divine services.”

“Outdoors is where I worship,” he’d told her, and immediately regretted how stiff that had probably sounded. But after all, he’d reflected, she was still the daughter of a Unitarian clergyman, whatever her beliefs, still needing the firmness of a pew beneath her to feel the nearness of God. Later he heard that John had obliged by escorting her to services. So which of us does she prefer, Henry had asked himself, the no-church brother or the low-church one? She seemed to distribute the favor of her attention equally, but he suspected it was John she truly cared for. And who could blame her?

If only he had John’s cheery demeanor. John put one at ease immediately because everyone seemed to sense the presence of his great heart. John, the genius of goodness, everything Henry admired and wished to be. He would have liked to crack out of his old self, like a locust splitting its crusty shell, and fly free, leaving the husk of the recalcitrant former Henry to be taken by the wind. With John, he’d started their little school for boys, and John had been wonderful, kind but stern, just what the boys needed. But Henry, well, he knew how stiff and ill at ease he was with the boys; they did not do well. The word *WINDBAG* had once appeared on the chalkboard. And then there was the expectation that boys would be beaten when they failed in their lessons. How could one thrash a sweet, clear-eyed boy just because he’d neglected the translation of his daily portion of Cicero? It was a loathsome business. But what to do next? There was always the family pencil factory enterprise, of course. No, he was far too restless and unsettled to spend a life behind a desk. All professions seemed to him like prisons for the soul.

But where had he drifted now? For he was floating like a balloon, above the village square of Concord. How lovely to float, how wonderful, but where had Ellen and John and the watery parlor gone? There they were down below with other townsfolk, there to see the camelopard, which some called a giraffe. It had made a stop in Concord on its tour. No such creature had ever been seen here.

“Why, it’s like a long-necked horse on stilts!” he heard Ellen say.

“Can it be real?” John asked. “It seems something from a dream, something entirely made up.”

“I am the dream,” Henry said, suddenly standing there among them. “We are all of us dreams.”

But no one appeared to hear him. They went on talking as if he were not there. The camelopard, ignoring the crowd, nibbled the leaves of a sycamore and gazed at the shopkeepers and townsfolk lined up politely around the square, as if to form a reception line for a distinguished visitor.

“It’s unnatural,” Aunt Pru snapped as she looked up at the creature. “And foreign.”

“How can it be unnatural,” Henry asked her, “when it’s as much a part of nature as we?”

She appeared to hear him this time and turned to ask, “But what’s it *for*? Why did God make it?”

“Perhaps for the same reason he made us. To glorify himself. He’s forever doing that, you know.”

“Henry, you must not be blasphemous. I won’t have it!”

The creature then turned its head and looked straight down at him. Its enormous eyes seemed ancient and wise. It regarded him with solemnity as though considering some weighty matter. Then it shook its head as if to clear its mind and turned back to the sycamore. In that turning, Henry somehow became more than ever convinced that Ellen and John would marry.

Ellen was smiling at John now; he was telling her one of his own dreams, which contained a creature as fabulous as the camelopard. “A horse with the face of our father,” he was saying. They were both laughing. The two people Henry loved most in life now loved each other. He could deny John nothing, and now it was the same with Ellen. He thought of the little verses he’d written for Ellen and given her on only the second day of her visit. It would not do for John to see them.

*As t’were two summer days in one,  
Two Sundays come together,  
Our rays united make one sun,  
With fairest summer weather.*

Now Aunt Pru was saying again, “I just don’t believe it’s real!”

“It is its own evidence of reality, isn’t it?” Henry asked. He caught John’s eye as he added, “And let us not forget that there are some kinds of circumstantial evidence difficult to ignore.”

John laughed and said, “Such as when one finds a trout in the milk.”

“Or when,” Henry added, “one finds a camelopard in the heart of Concord village.”

Henry leaned on John and John on him, laughing helplessly, while Ellen looked puzzled and Aunt Pru told her, “As you can see, they’re each other’s best audience.” Then to Henry and John she said, “Well, you might want to stop being silly and tell Ellen the story.”

John explained that a few years back, the fishmonger’s boy had brought some fresh trout to the kitchen, and while Aunt Pru was getting the coins to pay him, evidently one of the trout slithered out of the printed broadside in which the boy had wrapped them and plopped into a pitcher of milk on the table. The boy, too embarrassed to tell Aunt Pru, had taken his fee and run. Later, at breakfast, Henry pointed out that the taste of the milk was not quite what it should be. John had agreed.

“Well, the milk was fresh that morning,” Aunt Pru told Ellen now. “So I couldn’t imagine what the problem was.”

“Taste it,” the brothers had said, almost in unison.

“Well, it was positively fishy, as you can imagine,” she said.

When she’d poured the milk into a bowl, out flopped the dead trout. They’d all stared at it in silence.

“There would appear to be,” John said, “a trout in the milk.”

“Yes,” Henry added. “There is circumstantial evidence to that effect.”

“Which cannot be ignored.”

Again, Henry leaned into John’s laughter, felt it pass in waves through his lean body. Oh, how he loved laughing with John. That’s what he’d missed all these years: John and laughter. There’d been little enough of it since John’s death. How deliciously laughter rippled through one’s body! And here he was again with him, taking pleasure in him just as if they had not been rivals for Ellen’s hand as they stood there in the tall shadow of the camelopard. But after that day, for the first time in their lives, he and John had a subject they would not be able to bring themselves to discuss with each other.

Then everything became a muddle. Ellen returning home to Scituate and John following her there, Aunt Pru in tow as chaperone. No, hadn’t Henry first sent Ellen a collection of poems in the hope that she would respond? That then they could begin a correspondence? The past was always reshuffling itself, it seemed, like a pack of cribbage cards. At some point John had returned to Concord, and from his expression it seemed clear to Henry that his trip had been a success. And then suddenly a letter had arrived, and everything was reversed. Henry watched himself write in his journal:

*I heard that an engagement was entered into between a certain youth and a maiden, and then I heard that it was broken off, but I did not know the reason in either case.*

Poor Aunt Pru! She’d been unhappy with her role in the sad affair. She told Henry that she’d gone for a walk on the Scituate beach with Ellen and John. But becoming winded, she’d stopped to rest on some rocks and the pair had walked ahead. It was then that John apparently asked Ellen to marry him. Surprised, she accepted. But when she got home, she felt suddenly that she’d made a mistake. Perhaps it was Henry she really loved. So she wrote John at once.

But why had Ellen been so undecided? For as soon as John had her letter, he was downcast. Henry hadn’t known what to think. She’d hurt his beloved brother. Were all women like this, capable of reversing themselves in a moment? Then Ellen sent a chatty letter to Aunt Pru, asking, “What great work is Henry engaged in now?”

Aunt Pru suggested that Henry tell her himself.

A surge of fear had gone through him. It appeared that he had but to ask Ellen to be his wife and the thing was done. Now that it was at hand, he felt himself faltering, unable to act. It was one thing to admire her, but after the incident with John, was one obliged to marry her? Every time he tried to imagine himself as a husband, he could not do it. It would surely mean giving up his woodland ways, his solitariness. Other husbands in the village seemed to be homebodies, running errands for their wives, maintaining their shops or offices, reading broadsheets by the fire or farming their few stony acres. He despaired of ever being like them. It was this dailiness of village life that seemed like a jail to him. And yet wasn’t that what being a husband meant? And what about children? He liked them, yes, leading them on excursions to the huckleberry hills, trooping through the cranberry bogs, explaining the habits of the moles and chipmunks. But the prolonged noise and chaos of children indoors, would he be able to stand it? And under this all, like a distant resounding bell, was the fact that he had no physical knowledge of women. There were the classical statues, of course; one knew what lay under the hoopskirts and petticoats. But the thought of having to take them off Ellen filled him with terror. He tried to imagine their wedding night but could not bring himself to it.

How much simpler and more satisfying was the company of men. He suspected that many men felt this way but were bound to carry out the procreational duties that society asked of them. Sometimes, holding the gaze of a striking stranger across a lecture hall just a moment too long, he heard a different drumbeat entirely. But he’d quickly avert his gaze before he embarrassed either himself or the other. One needn’t be like the odious poet Whitman, who waved his sensualities like a flag.

So if one were to marry at all, then it had to be Ellen whom one married; no one else would ever be likely. Apparently it was now his duty to propose. He began to sketch out the letter in his journal. It was best, he thought, to approach the subject from a great distance. To approach slowly and with dignity, as would befit such a decision.

*I thought that the sun of our love should have risen as noiselessly as the sun out of the sea, and we sailors have found ourselves steering between the tropics as if the broad day had lasted forever. You know how the sun comes up from the sea when you stand on the cliff and doesn’t startle you, but everything and you too are helping it.*

After many paragraphs, the question had been asked. When he’d mailed the letter, Henry sat back to reflect glumly. What if she refused him or, even more alarming, what if she didn’t? It was out of his hands now. If Ellen said yes, he would try to be a worthy husband. But should she reject his proposal, he had to have a plan. He could not bear another season in the schoolroom. Well, there was the planned excursion with John on the Merrimack and Concord Rivers. Such a trip might help them sail over this confusion between them about Ellen. And what was it Mr. Emerson had said about the strip of woods he owned around Walden Pond? Henry could use it, if he liked. A small house, perhaps, in the woods, a fire in the stove and stacks of books and journals. He thought of the azure water of the deep pond. Looked at from the wooded hillside, the pond always seemed to him a great eye looking out at the universe. And there were the jolly ice cutters who came each January to slice the pond surface into great blocks to be stored in straw until summer, when townsfolk could cool their drinks and brows. The ice cutters sang as they sawed the surface ice. Yes, yes, the life of the woods. He felt himself drifting through the trees, looking below for the jolly little Irish ice cutter with the fine tenor voice.

But it was Sophia’s voice he heard from far away. She was saying something about hyacinths. Henry began the hard journey back—it was more difficult to return all the time—room by room. Opening doors and closing them behind him, from the farthest room all the way to the one in which Sophia was speaking. Why should he have to come back at all?

“Look, Henry, Judge Lockwood has brought you some hyacinths from his garden.”

Henry’s eyelids seemed weighted. With great effort—oh, why was it so difficult?—they lifted halfway. But it was so murky, all this dark blue and purple up next to his face, and yes, the piercing scent of hyacinths. Sophia was holding them to his nose. Their neighbor, Judge Lockwood, was a vague form in the doorway. Henry thanked him and inhaled the scent again, so deeply this time that he thought he might faint.

“Will you prop me up with the pillows?” he asked Sophia. Her face came close to his and her hand touched his brow. Why did she look so alarmed? And why was she calling to Elsie, the housemaid, to run to the icehouse and bring back a towel filled with ice chips to cool his forehead? What could she be thinking of with him sitting here shivering? For yes, suddenly the room was so very cold.

His eyes closed of themselves, and he floated right through the great doorway of Hodgkins’ Icehouse. Below him, packed in straw and canvas, lay the slabs of solid azure, the unroofed winter house of Walden fishes. Now he was there among the ice cutters on the pond again. Oh, he loved the way they invaded his lonely woods each winter and filled the frozen air with their laughter. Cartloads of tools they brought, and all manner of them: drill barrows, turf knives, saws, rakes, double-pointed pikestaffs. When they’d sawed the ice into cakes, they hauled them onto carts with grappling irons and block and tackle, all worked by steaming horses. Like the Walden water, the ice seen near at hand had a green tint but at a distance was wonderfully blue. One could tell it easily from the white ice of the river or the merely greenish ice of some of the other ponds. How interesting it was that if one left water in a pail, it became putrid in only a few days. But ice retained the purity of water sometimes for years in the dark of Hodgkins’ Icehouse. Yes, yes, now he understood it as metaphor: the difference between the endurance of affection and the endurance of intellect.

There had been no affection in the letter he’d received from Ellen. It had been terse and cool in rejecting his proposal, dictated, Aunt Pru learned, by Ellen’s father. He had no intention of marrying his daughter to either of the Thoreau brothers, whose transcendentalist ideas were loathsome to him.

“I never felt so badly at sending a letter in all my life,” she wrote Aunt Pru. “I am mortified at Father’s decision and worried. Do tell me that Henry is all right and not saddened by all this trouble. Oh, I do wish he had not proposed, but let us speak of it no more.”

Henry felt again the rush of relief he’d felt then; how easily it had outweighed the humiliation of rejection. Enough of this world of marriage and cozy households. How had he ever even considered it? The company of the woods, their dark, loamy scents, that would be his lot. He would build a house by the side of the pond and listen to the earth, the most glorious of instruments. And in winter watch a thousand tons of ice a day taken out by the singing ice cutters.

“Why, it’s as much as a whole acre of terra firma, sawed into parts,” the little cutter with his great ginger mustache was telling him. A very friendly sort of Irishman, he waved at Henry when passing the cabin each January. Henry went down to the shore to watch him and the others grapple with the great blocks of ice. They always hailed him and invited him to saw pit-fashion with them. The work was hard but very warming, and their coats piled up by the side of the pond. He admired these men of strong arm and chest, liked the way they worked so well together in teams. The little Irish cutter would leap onto a block of ice that the others were raising and sing out an old folk song in his swelling tenor.

*They who have lov’d the fondest, the purest,  
Too often have wept o’er the dream they believ’d;  
And the heart that has slumber’d in friendship securest,  
Is happy indeed if ’twas never deceiv’d.*

The cutter’s face was all red with the spirit of the song ringing through the cold air of the woods. It was as if he would explode with the beauty of it all, the song, the woods, his strength in body and soul. He sang for his comrades and especially for Henry, looking straight at him.

*But send round the bowl; while a relic of truth  
Is in man or in woman, this pray’r shall be mine,  
That the sunshine of love may illumine our youth,  
And the moonlight of friendship console our decline.*

Oh, it was so cold, the ice, someone was rubbing it on his forehead, but he was too cold already. Sophia was there, and who else? They swam above him and around him; why, the room seemed full of them. He stretched out his hands to them, but look, it was the little ice cutter who seized his hands. He’d slipped on an ice slab as it tilted and had fallen into the freezing water. He was shaking convulsively when Henry and the others pulled him out, his clothes dripping in the freezing wind. And then they were in the cabin, he and the cutter—oh, take the ice away, death will be cold enough without it—and Henry helping him out of his sopping clothes in front of the woodstove, wrapping a warm sheet around his pale nakedness, drying him, holding him to quiet his shivering. Why, he was just a boy, thin and delicate, standing in the glow from the little stove, its door ajar, the flames rising and falling inside the square of light.

And yes, of course, he understood now, it was this boy that Death had sent for him—the circumstantial evidence not to be ignored. Why had it taken so long to understand? Oh, never mind, what did it matter now? For suddenly the fire was dying down in the stove. The boy reached out, pushed its little door shut, and the square of light went dark.