

## from Nature

Ralph Waldo Emerson

To go into solitude, a man needs to retire as much from his chamber<sup>1</sup> as from society. I am not solitary while I read and write, though nobody is with me. But if a man would be alone, let him look at the stars. The rays that come from those heavenly worlds, will separate between him and vulgar things. One might think the atmosphere was made transparent with this design, to give man, in the heavenly bodies, the perpetual presence of the sublime.<sup>2</sup> Seen in the streets of cities, how great they are! If the stars should appear one night in a thousand years, how would men believe and adore; and preserve for many generations the remembrance of the city of God which had been shown!

But every night come out these envoys<sup>3</sup> of beauty, and light the universe with their admonishing smile.<sup>1</sup>

The stars awaken a certain reverence, because though always present, they are always inaccessible; but all natural objects make a kindred impression, when the mind is open to their influence. Nature never wears a mean appearance. Neither does the wisest man extort all her secrets, and lose his curiosity by finding out all her perfection. Nature never became a toy to a wise spirit. The flowers, the animals, the mountains, reflected all the wisdom of his best hour, as much as they had delighted the simplicity of his childhood.

When we speak of nature in this manner, we have a distinct but most poetical sense in the

1. **chamber** *n.*: room.
2. **sublime** *adj.* used as *n.*: something that inspires awe. Here, Emerson refers to the divine.
3. **envoys** *n. pl.*: messengers.

1 ? According to this first paragraph, how would people respond if the stars came out only one night every thousand years?

mind. We mean the integrity of impression made by manifold<sup>4</sup> natural objects. It is this which distinguishes the stick of timber of the woodcutter, from the tree of the poet. The charming landscape which I saw this morning is indubitably<sup>5</sup> made up of some twenty or thirty farms. Miller owns this field, Locke that, and Manning the woodland beyond. But none of them owns the landscape. There is a property in the horizon which no man has but he whose eye can integrate all the parts, that is, the poet. This is the best part of these men's farms, yet to this their warranty deeds<sup>6</sup> give no title.<sup>2</sup>

To speak truly, few adult persons can see nature. Most persons do not see the sun. At least they have a very superficial seeing. The sun illuminates only the eye of the man, but shines into the eye and the heart of the child. The lover of nature is he whose inward and outward senses are still truly adjusted to each other; who has retained the spirit of infancy even into the era of manhood. His intercourse with heaven and earth, becomes part of his daily food. In the presence of nature, a wild delight runs through the man, in spite of real sorrows.<sup>3</sup> Nature says—he is my creature, and

2 ? What can the poet's eye do when he or she looks at nature?

3 ? How does Emerson define the "lover of nature"?

4. **manifold** *adj.*: many and varied.
5. **indubitably** *adv.*: without a doubt.
6. **warranty deeds** *n. pl.*: legal documents showing ownership of property.

### Vocabulary

**admonishing** (ad·män'ish·in) *v.* used as *adj.*: gently warning.

**integrate** (in'tə·grät') *v.*: unify.

maugre<sup>7</sup> all his impertinent griefs, he shall be glad with me. Not the sun or the summer alone, but every hour and season yields its tribute of delight; for every hour and change corresponds to and authorizes a different state of the mind, from breathless noon to grimmest midnight. Nature is a setting that fits equally well a comic or a mourning piece. In good health, the air is a cordial<sup>8</sup> of incredible virtue. Crossing a bare common, in snow puddles, at twilight, under a clouded sky, without having in my thoughts any occurrence of special good fortune, I have enjoyed a perfect exhilaration. Almost I fear to think how glad I am. In the woods too, a man casts off his years, as the snake his slough,<sup>9</sup> and at what period soever of life, is always a child. In the woods, is perpetual youth. Within these plantations of God, a decorum<sup>10</sup> and sanctity reign, a perennial festival is dressed, and the guest sees not how he should tire of them in a thousand years. In the woods, we return to reason and faith. There I feel that nothing can befall me in life—no disgrace, no calamity (leaving me my eyes), which nature cannot repair. Standing on the bare ground—my head bathed by the blithe air, and uplifted into infinite space—all mean egotism vanishes. I become a transparent eyeball. I am nothing. I see all. The currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part or particle of God. The name of the nearest friend sounds then foreign and accidental. To be brothers, to be acquaintances—master or servant, is then a trifle and a disturbance. I am the lover of uncontained and immortal beauty. In the wilderness, I find something more dear and connate<sup>11</sup> than in streets or villages. In the tranquil landscape, and espe-

7. **maugre** (mə'gər) *prep.*: archaic for “in spite of; despite.”  
 8. **cordial** (kôr'jəl) *n.*: medicine, food, or drink that stimulates the heart.  
 9. **slough** (sluf) *n.*: outer layer of a snake’s skin, which is shed periodically.  
 10. **decorum** *n.*: orderliness.  
 11. **connate** *adj.*: having the same nature.

cially in the distant line of the horizon, man beholds somewhat<sup>12</sup> as beautiful as his own nature. **4**

The greatest delight which the fields and woods minister, is the suggestion of an occult relation between man and the vegetable. I am not alone and unacknowledged. They nod to me and I to them. The waving of the boughs in the storm, is new to me and old. It takes me by surprise, and yet is not unknown. Its effect is like that of a higher thought or a better emotion coming over me, when I deemed I was thinking justly or doing right. **5**

Yet it is certain that the power to produce this delight, does not reside in nature, but in man, or in a harmony of both. It is necessary to use these pleasures with great temperance. For, nature is not always tricked<sup>13</sup> in holiday attire, but the same scene which yesterday breathed perfume and glittered as for the frolic of the nymphs, is overspread with melancholy today. Nature always wears the colors of the spirit. To a man laboring under calamity, the heat of his own fire hath sadness in it. Then, there is a kind of contempt of the landscape felt by him who has just lost by death a dear friend. The sky is less grand as it shuts down over less worth in the population. **6** ■

**4**  
 ? What does Emerson think and feel when he stands in the woods?

**5**  
 ? What is the greatest delight the fields and woods give us, according to Emerson?

**6**  
 ? What does Emerson say about how our own moods can affect the way we look at nature?

12. **somewhat** *pron.*: something.  
 13. **tricked** *v.*: dressed up.

#### Vocabulary

- perennial** (pə·ren'ē·əl) *adj.*: persistent; constant.  
**blithe** (blīth) *adj.*: carefree.  
**occult** (ə·kult') *adj.*: hidden.

#### Advanced Learners

**Enrichment.** Have students read Emerson’s famous Harvard lectures “The American Scholar” and (1)

coherent or inconsistent philosophical systems and whether they agree with Emerson’s



*Long Island Farmer Husking Corn* (1833–1834) by William Sidney Mount. Oil on canvas mounted on panel (20<sup>7</sup>/<sub>8</sub>" × 16<sup>7</sup>/<sub>8</sub>").

The Long Island Museum of American Art, History and Carriages. Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Ward Melville, 1975.

## from **Self-Reliance**

### Ralph Waldo Emerson

**T**here is a time in every man's education when he arrives at the conviction that envy is ignorance; that imitation is suicide; that he must take himself for better, for worse, as his portion; that though the wide universe is full of good, no kernel of nourishing corn can come to him but through his toil bestowed on that plot of ground which is given to him to till. The power which resides in him is new in nature, and none but he knows what that is which he can do, nor does he know until he has tried. Not for nothing one face, one character, one fact makes much impression on him, and another

none. This sculpture in the memory is not without preestablished harmony. **1** The eye was placed where one ray should fall, that it might testify of that particular ray. We but half express ourselves, and are

**1** Emerson believes that each person has unique talents and passions that can be discovered only on one's own.  
**?** What does he mean by "this sculpture in the memory"?

#### Vocabulary

**conviction** (kan·vik'shən) *n.*: fixed or strong belief.

ashamed of that divine idea which each of us represents. It may be safely trusted as proportionate<sup>1</sup> and of good issues, so it be faithfully imparted, but God will not have his work made manifest<sup>2</sup> by cowards. A man is relieved and gay when he has put his heart into his work and done his best; but what he has said or done otherwise, shall give him no peace. It is a deliverance which does not deliver. In the attempt his genius deserts him; no muse befriends; no invention, no hope.<sup>2</sup>

2 According to Emerson, when is a person relieved and happy?

Trust thyself: Every heart vibrates to that iron string. Accept the place the divine Providence has found for you; the society of your contemporaries, the connection of events. Great men have always done so and confided themselves child-like to the genius of their age, betraying their perception that the absolutely trustworthy was seated at their heart, working through their hands, predominating<sup>2</sup> in all their being. And we are now men, and must accept in the highest mind the same transcendent destiny; and not minors and invalids in a protected corner, not cowards fleeing before a revolution, but guides, redeemers, and benefactors, obeying the Almighty effort, and advancing on Chaos and the Dark...<sup>3</sup>

3 Who or what should every person trust?

These are the voices which we hear in solitude, but they grow faint and inaudible as we enter into the world. Society everywhere is in conspiracy against the manhood of every one of its members. Society is a joint-stock company in which the members agree for the better securing of his bread to each shareholder, to surrender the liberty and culture of the eater. The virtue in most request is conformity. Self-reliance is its aversion.<sup>3</sup> It loves not realities

1. **proportionate** *adj.*: having a correct relationship between parts; balanced.
2. **predominating** *v.* used as *adj.*: having influence or power.
3. **aversion** *n.*: object of intense dislike or opposition.

and creators, but names and customs.<sup>4</sup>

Whoso would be a man must be a non-conformist.

He who would gather immortal palms<sup>4</sup> must not be hindered by the name of goodness, but must explore if it be goodness. Nothing is at last sacred but the integrity of your own mind. Absolve<sup>5</sup> you to yourself, and you shall have the suffrage of the world...<sup>5</sup>

4 What is the opposite, or "aversion," of self-reliance?

5 According to Emerson, what must a person be?

A foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds, adored by little statesmen and philosophers and divines. With consistency a great soul has simply nothing to do. He may as well concern himself with his shadow on the wall. Speak what you think now in hard words, and tomorrow speak what tomorrow thinks in hard words again, though it contradict everything you said today—"Ah, so you shall be sure to be misunderstood"—Is it so bad then to be misunderstood? Pythagoras was misunderstood, and Socrates, and Jesus, and Luther, and Copernicus, and Galileo, and Newton,<sup>6</sup> and every pure and wise spirit that ever took flesh. To be great is to be misunderstood...<sup>6</sup> ■

6 What does Emerson say about "foolish consistency"?

4. **he who ... immortal palms**: he who would win fame. In ancient times, palm leaves were carried as a symbol of victory or triumph.
5. **absolve** *v.*: pronounce free from guilt or blame.
6. **Pythagoras ... Newton**: people whose contributions to scientific, philosophical, and religious thought were ignored or suppressed during their lifetimes.

### Vocabulary

**imparted** (im·pärt'id) *v.*: revealed.  
**manifest** (man'ə·fəst) *adj.*: plain; clear.  
**transcendent** (tran·sen'dənt) *adj.*: excelling; surpassing.  
**integrity** (in·teg' rə·tē) *n.*: sound moral principles; honesty.