

Seeing Red
by Corydon Ireland

Once upon a morning, not long ago, Penrose Hubbard III took his usual seat in the small room reserved for scholars at the Concord Museum. The compact space, dubbed Sleepy Hollow by its placid regulars, was the same size as Henry David Thoreau's famous cabin at Walden Pond. It had a single window, three wooden tables, six chairs, and cream-colored walls lined with old portraits of puritans and poets.

Hubbard, age 40, was a plain and practical man of medium height whose trust fund allowed him to pursue independent scholarship fulltime. He favored all-cotton shirts, khaki chinos, and – when the cold arrived – coats of old-fashioned wool. He had thinning sandy hair, consumed a vegetarian diet, and owned little. Vicariously nostalgic for a nineteenth century past he never personally experienced, Hubbard used wood to heat his house, a small craftsman's cottage in a woodlot at the edge of Concord. Hubbard traveled widely, but only in the manner of Thoreau, his hero and the subject of his scholarship.

Thoreau had extolled the idea of seeing the world while staying in one place. For Hubbard that one place was Sleepy Hollow, a six-seat time machine whose gears and levers were old books, journals, and artifacts. By filling out a request card, he could set the travel dial to any year of the American past.

Hubbard knew that many present-day Concord citizens secretly regarded Thoreau with the same contempt their counterparts had 170 years ago. The argument went something like this, then and now: Thoreau, a Harvard graduate, had settled for being a flower collector, a bandy-legged wanderer, and a homely contrarian who despised collective drive and enterprise and making money. But Hubbard regarded Thoreau as a long lost brother, a philosophical sibling who wore his passions plain, like homespun, but who also held within in himself a hidden layer of whimsy. In his 35th year, for instance, Thoreau was fitted with a full set of false teeth, an operation whose anesthesia prompted him to write afterwards: "If you have an inclination to travel, take the ether; you go beyond the furthest star."

The story delighted Hubbard, though he wasn't himself inclined to use ether. "You see," he told a friend, "Thoreau was a traveler after all."

On the morning in question, Hubbard removed a pair of white cotton archivist's gloves from his briefcase and put them on. His other tools were already out: a pad of paper, four sharpened pencils, a small camera, a wooden ruler, and a magnifying glass.

In front of Hubbard lay a handsome artifact: a seventeenth-century deerskin quiver decorated with tiny seashells. The pouch, more than a foot long and fitted with a leather strap, was the work of a long-ago Massachusetts Indian. The tribe had virtually disappeared in the wake of early European exploration, leaving behind little more than its euphonious name. In 1614, when the English adventurer Captain John Smith had briefly explored New England, there were 6,000 Massachusetts

Indians. Five years later, because of a plague carried by European rats, there were 500.

The quiver, recently discovered in a Concord attic and given to the museum, was the spawn of a culture at least 15,000 years old. Fate had snipped that culture like a ribbon, setting it afloat on a breeze to obscurity.

To Hubbard the quiver was not only rare but it was startling and resonant: It had once belonged to Thoreau. Accompanying the artifact was a letter penned by William Ellery Channing, a close friend who was present at the writer's deathbed. "This was upon the wall of the parlor," he had written, "and was a work of art Henry adored. When he died, his gaze was upon it."

Hubbard was the first scholar to ever examine the quiver, and with good reason. Even among university experts, he was a respected student of Thoreau artifacts, starting with nineteenth century pencils. Hubbard's monograph on Thoreau's advances in graphite-and-clay technology, "The Poet of Plumbago," is still regarded as a minor classic.

Hubbard had steadily comb through the museum's Thoreau collection in search of inspiration. He looked at the energetic naturalist's arrowheads, rock collection, brass spyglass, surveying chain, flute, Aeolian harp, birch tree tap wrapped with twine, walking stick, and mahogany ruler. He even studied a few remaining foundation stones from the famous cabin at Walden Pond.

One day, while busy with a box of Thoreau treasures, Hubbard sat on an arrowhead. The accident required a visit to the emergency room and cost the frugal

scholar a pair of chinos. But the mishap also supplied Hubbard with the inspiration for a new task: To construct a scholarly outline of a book Thoreau never got to write.

In the last years of his life, Thoreau was fascinated by the pre-contact Indians of the northeast tribes: the Algonquin nation that had thrived, unrecorded, before the advent of European settlement – and that Thoreau fervently believed had much wisdom to offer Western culture. The Indian, he wrote, was “the red face of Man,” the one, true original human in whom nature still dwelt.

Hubbard, sitting on a cushion at first to protect one arrow-pierced buttock, pored through the 11 thick notebooks Thoreau had compiled: 2,800 pages of details on Indian food, weapons, music, art, lodging, beliefs, physique, and much more.

Thoreau scholarship, Hubbard reflected, was as picked clean as a trailside berry patch. But the key to this unfinished book lay buried in notebooks and artifacts. It was a new world of inquiry, and Hubbard felt the thrill of being the first modern traveler within it.

And now the quiver. Would it provide another guidepost to that new world? At his table in Sleepy Hollow, Hubbard left the quiver untouched while he took notes. He snapped digital photos. With the magnifying glass, he studied the pouch’s leather, shells, and deer-sinew stitching. He took measurements with a wooden ruler not unlike the one Thoreau carried with him on his rambles.

To complete the investigation, Hubbard reached inside, feeling along the hidden surface inch by inch. Deep near the quiver’s bottom he felt something made of paper. He eased it into the light. It was a letter, emblazoned with an address and

written in Thoreau's hand. Not the hasty scrawl of his field notes, but the inked, right-slanting, formal hand of his surveying reports.

Hubbard felt suddenly lightheaded. He drew a deep breath.

Dated April 22, 1848, the letter was addressed to Channing, later the keeper of the quiver and the friend who had been with Thoreau the day he died. It was Channing who had heard Thoreau's very last mortal word: "Indian."

**

"Dear Friend and Believer," the letter began.

"I may never send you this. And its contents are not fit for my journal," Thoreau wrote. "But I must get this story down. Let the fates take it."

Thoreau went on: "You know me. I woke from my boy's dream of Cooper. I rejected the vague wonders of dear Mr. Emerson. I would ask him now: If Nature makes me a transparent eye-ball, how big is that eye-ball? How thick, and how out of round? More than ever, I grapple to my bosom the rational neatness of grids, dates, numbers, and my notched measuring stick and my folding wooden rule.

"But dear friend, science is not all. Remember that – always. Something just transpired that has me at my wit's end. Let me tell you."

Hubbard listened, as Thoreau went on:

I study and write in the mornings. My afternoons are for rambles. Two, three, or five hours around Concord. You have walked with me: Get off the roads fast, dart into the woods and marsh. Use brush or bramble or a line of trees to slip past farms unseen. Always ramble westward when near Concord. Boston is east. That hellish Babylon of merchant enterprise, that sewer of getting and spending (Emerson is

always good for a phrase!). To the woods. Notebook and pencil in hand, eyes and ears at the ready. Outdoors, as you know, I am in my study: flower, fungus, feather, and fur! At night, the moon is my lantern.

Yesterday I set off not long after 1 in the p.m. I headed for that rise near my old cabin at Walden. The place you called “the briars,” where in my second summer I had the sense to grow fewer beans. I walked up the slope, reflecting on this fleet, fleeing life: The briars are back. The sticks of my old cabin are now across town, as you know, living a new life as a grain shed.

I paused at the edge of my old bean field. To my left, along a line of woods, a single crow lifted into the air, rasping out its caws. The sound lifted my hair in fear and wonder. But why should it have? Perhaps because I am full of the old Indian tales now of humans taking an animal shape. And yes, you remember, I once dreamed of being a woodchuck – solitary, hardy, close to the ground.

As I watched, the crow wheeled and circled back. A moment later an Indian appeared at the edge of the woods and walked toward me. He wore the dress of the old vanished Massachusetts: moccasins, leggings, and a breechclout of deerskin. He was bare-chested, young and strong, and the color of copper. Three black crow feathers stood straight up from his headband. Slung over one shoulder were a quiver and a bow. At his waist were a medicine pouch, a length of deer horn, and a knife in a sheath of shells and leather. He drew close.

“Long Nose,” the Indian said. “I remember you living here. In the small house.”

You know I am sensitive about my nose, Ellery. There were those stings at Harvard: Thoreau, the Egyptian statue.

The Indian took in my puzzlement. "My name is Crow," he said.

"That was my cabin," I said, finding my voice.

"It resembles our winter longhouses," he said, "but smaller."

I looked at this man in leather clothing that was spangled with shells.

"Where do you come from?" I asked. "I know people who look like you. But they wear clothes like mine. They pray in churches."

"I come from beyond the smoke," Crow said. "My place of worship is like yours: the woods and the rivers."

"There is no smoke here," I said.

Crow squatted in the grass and set his bow to one side.

"Here is the smoke," he said. He cleared a patch of grass in front of him and on the bare earth piled bits of dried briar. From the deer horn he removed a small ember. He placed it glowing in the briar and leaned forward, puffing to life a small blaze.

"I come in peace," said Crow. "To talk to the white man who hoes beans and who walks night and day in hard places."

"Many others hoe beans," I said.

He answered, "No one walks as you do. You are brave and limber."

"Like a woodchuck," I said.

“That is our other name for you,” said Crow. “Your small house is hidden in the woods like a burrow. Your arms are short. Your legs are bowed and strong. The woodchuck is your brother animal. Mine is the crow.”

“Crows fly,” I said.

“I fly far,” said the man.

“Crows are social,” I said. “Where are the others like you?”

“Beyond the smoke,” he said. “My village is there. The others are there.”

From among the arrows in his quiver, Crow removed a long pipe of wood and bone. From his medicine bag he took a few dried leaves and crushed them.

“You have the name ‘Henry,’” said Crow. “But I will call you by your spirit name.”

He tamped the crushed leaves into the pipe.

“I am a student of plants,” I said. “What are those leaves called?”

“Dream leaves,” said Crow. “No one knows these leaves any more. They are lost. These are from another time.”

Bending to the small fire, he lit the pipe. The leaves turned orange with heat. Burning, they gave off a sweet smell, scented like nutmeg and tobacco.

Crow drew in his cheeks mightily and blew out and filled the air in front of us with fragrant smoke.

He gave me the pipe. I drew in the fumes. Instantly my head whirled like a top. I fell back to the ground and spread my arms like wings. My eyes fluttered open. I saw the sky.

“Woodchuck,” I heard Crow say, “fly with me.”

I blinked again. Beyond the black trees, the sky wavered in narrow blue bands. Clouds scudded, then rippled fast, blue then white then blue. There was a hum. Then a breeze came up and with it the smell of trees and sea air. I felt peace.

I sat up. Before me squatted Crow. "We flew together," he said. "We landed where I wished. It is the power of the dream leaves."

His clothing was the same. His quiver was still stiff with the feathers of many arrows. His bow was strung. He was an Indian of the old aboriginal time.

By handfuls, I gathered my wits. All about us were not young sticks of Concord pine, but massive oak and chestnut and elm: the forest primeval. I sat within a lush green sward of the New World.

"Stand," he said, holding out a hand. "My *wetu* is near."

We walked to a small clearing. At one edge stood a dome-like hut covered with tree bark. It was encircled four times with thin tree branches. A small door was cut in one side. We sat beside the door on supple deerskins warm from the sun. As in Concord, it was mid-afternoon. The *wetu* was part of a spring encampment near the sea, where the shore teemed with food to be gathered and fished.

A slender young woman in a dress of deerskin appeared. She put before us two wooden bowls of porridge. I recognized the dish from my reading: boiled maize, with kidney beans and a pottage of fish and other meats. I braced myself for eating the flesh of animals, which I do but which unsettles me. You know I despise killing, Ellery. But I was a guest.

Crow ignored the food. So I did too.

The young woman, shy and pretty, ducked back into the *wetu*.

“My sister,” said Crow.

At the edge of the trees I saw others. There was a small band of men with faces streaked black and with arrows strung. Next to them, several women leaned forward to see the pale man in strange clothing. Around the adults stood silent small gatherings of young boys and girls.

“I seek your counsel, Woodchuck,” he said. “I can fly beyond the smoke. The smoke allows me to speak your language, though it feels very strange to my mouth.”

The others moved closer.

“For a time I observed you in the house by the lake,” said Crow. “I observed your ways only. You are white, but you seem wise.”

“Regarding the people we call Indians, Crow, I have read many books.”

“The spirit papers,” he said. “I saw you with them.”

“Yes – those. But you and your kind are the masters of nature. And you are masters of travel, apparently. I have nothing to teach you.”

“You can teach us much,” Crow said. “But first, listen to a story.”

He said: “In the beginning, there were no people in this world with white skin. But one day not long ago, in the last moon, some Indians were fishing where the river widens into the sea. Far away on the big water they saw a large fish. It began to move toward them. It grew larger and larger.

“They saw that it was not a fish but a house that moved on the water. Above the house were clouds with bellies that fluttered in the wind.

“Soon the house on the water was close to the fishermen. The sides of the house contained human beings with white faces. Then the house moved away. Soon it was small on the big water. Then it was gone.

“Runners and men in canoes went up and down the shore. They brought the story of the house on the big water to all the villages. Elders and chiefs gathered here. There was confusion and fear. Some said the house on the water was bringing Mannitto, the Supreme Being. Others said: If this is so, why does the Supreme Being have a white face? Many said the house on the big water was full of devils.”

Crow went on: “We need your counsel. How should we act? You are from the Next Time, the time beyond the smoke.”

I knew the moment that Crow spoke of: Contact. In this moment all the Indians of pre-history would begin their slide into the slaughter pen of English colonies. Behind them would tumble all else – their food, dwellings, medicine, governments, marriage ways, weapons, and dress.

I asked Crow, “What year is it on this side of the smoke?”

“I do not know the name year,” he said. “That is not our way.”

A brave ran up. He was panting. He spoke fast, in a native tongue.

“The house on the water is here,” Crow told me, translating. He added: “I intended this.”

“Seeing what has arrived,” I said, “will answer the mystery of the year.”

Crow and I and the band behind us walked fast through the trees. We approached the sea, and the tree cover thinned and the smell of salt air rushed in on a sharp, cooling breeze. Then we stood on a bluff overlooking the Atlantic. Below,

beyond a path slanting through sea grass, was a beach of yellow sand. On the horizon, less than a mile distant, was a sailing ship. It was boxy and small and its mainsail billowed. The ship was making speed.

Behind us gathered the braves and the handsome maidens and the squaws and the children. I thought to myself: This is the outer verge of an ancient people brought to witness its first moment of doom.

“A small house has fallen from the mother house,” said Crow. “It is coming toward us.”

“We call that a rowboat,” I said. “The house on the water is called a ship.”

“This is where we need you,” said Crow. “This is the moment we can’t see with clear eyes. Is the Supreme Being visiting? Or are devils about to set upon us?”

“Some of each,” I said.

The rowboat cut fast for shore. It was laden with a dozen men. I saw pikes upright, glinting in the sun, and men with gleaming breastplates and peaked helmets.

“Lend me your bow and quiver,” I said to Crow. “Let us make our way to the beach. Bring all the braves.”

We soon stood in a line on the beach: 20 were men wearing skins and shells and feathers. I wore my felt hat, the one with the band inside for botany specimens. I wore my brown homespun jacket and trousers and my leather American shoes.

The boat knifed to shore. The mystery of the year was solved. Stepping off first was a burly short man in breastplate and helmet. His round face, pale and

whiskered, would be familiar to any schoolboy. It was Captain John Smith, the English explorer and chief land agent and dream-maker of the New World.

I knew from my boyhood reading that Smith had visited New England in 1614. He had made a map, and had given New England its name.

I realized with a start: The smoke had carried me over time almost 250 years. I had stepped off the pages of a book into a real world within a vanished past.

With one hand on the hilt of his sheathed sword, little Smith strode up. The tip of his helmet reached my chin. I am 5 feet 7 inches tall.

Before me, sealed into breastplate and simmering with verve, was the boy-sized primogeniture of all the New World's grasping and cheating to come. Here he was before me: Captain John Smith, the primal model of the "unmanly love of wealth" I had decried as a 20-year-old making my Commencement speech in Harvard Yard. He smelled of bacon, sweat, and brandy.

"Captain Smith, I greet you from far away," I said.

"You are right next to me, laddie," he said.

"Next to you, and far apart too," I said.

And here let history note: Captain John Smith had the reedy voice of a boy.

"You are a man of puzzles, I ken," he said, not unfriendly. "What is your name? You know mine."

Behind Smith, other men – perhaps 10 in all – exited the boat and stood uneasily.

"I am Henry Thoreau."

“Mr. Throw,” said Smith, “I knew there were other explorers before me. And what a pretty welcome you have made for us.”

“We wish you a safe return,” I said.

“For knowing me,” said Smith, ignoring the gibe, “are you from England?”

“I am from here,” I said. “*New England.*”

“I like that,” he said. “It has a certain ring. I’m going to steal it.”

“And much more,” I said.

“You are full of puzzles, I say,” repeated Smith. “Your habiliments are a puzzle too.”

Behind the captain, a ship’s officer stepped closer, hefting a matchlock musket. It was like something out of an old storybook: ornate and heavy, with a barrel that belled out like a horn. Smoldering near the stock was a burning punk. Press a lever, touch the ember to a priming charge, and *pa-poom!* – out flies a lead ball the size of a bird’s egg.

“Woodchuck,” said Crow, “what is your counsel?”

Smith said suddenly, “The big one speaks English? He will be valuable.” He stepped forward.

“Step back, Smith. Go. Take your men and your pox with you.”

Crow hefted a war club. The braves to either side of us notched arrows.

I was sweating through my hatband. I reminded myself: Smith is the size of a family dog. But he is a soldier of renown and a seasoned fighter.

“I am a nonviolent man of peace,” I said to Crow.

At those words, Smith seemed to relax.

“But here is my advice,” I added. “Kill them all.”

At this, the officer leveled the musket. A plume of yellow smoke shot into the air. A flash and boom. A ball cut down the man next to me. He fell with a huff.

Blade suddenly out, Smith swung at me, but the crushing arc of Crow’s war club deflected the blow. More of the boat crew stepped forward, swords and pikes at the ready. Arrows thumbed in at them from just yards away. Arrows clicked off armor, cut into the sea, or found their marks. The man with the musket fell back, a shaft in his throat. In a moment few English were left. They fled for the boat.

Smith was knocked to the sand by the swing of Crow’s club. Seeing the odds, he swiveled and on all fours fast-crawled to the rowboat. It was already bow-first in the waves. Pulling for life at the oars were two pale men.

I notched an arrow, remembered Smith’s armor plate, and took aim at his retreating haunches. I reflected, for an instant, that the bobbing rear orbs of Captain John Smith were of considerable dimensions. (Again, let history make note.) One arrow up that bum, I thought, will change the course of the world. He would not survive to seduce crowded Europe with *A Description of New England*, the tract that in 1616 would set alive a bee swarm of desire. “Fish,” Smith sang in the book, of all New England could offer. “Wood, Flax, Pitch, Tarre, Rosin, Cordage.” He sang the chorus in the same pretty print: “Silver, Pearles, and Pretious stones.”

The arrow sang sweetly off my bow. But Smith had just risen to scramble into the boat. The sharp flint sparked off the armor at his back.

“Out,” said Crow next to me. “Back.”

We ran back, past the fallen brave. Ahead, on the bluff, the women keened. The children cried.

The village fled wholesale into the woods. They feared a counter-attack by the pale men in metal hats. They feared the booming sticks that made fire and smoke. But I knew Smith was a soldier: Retreat when you have to. Return when you can, overwhelmingly.

Smith never returned to New England, as you know, Ellery. But little Smiths – he and he and he and she and them – came by the thousands. Ahead in time, Crow and his kind fled. They flew. They died.

A few hundred yards from shore, I slowed to a walk, panting. Crow was next to me.

“I failed you, my friend. Those men will be back, and others like them.”

“It is the will of Mannitto,” said Crow, turning and grasping me at the shoulders. “We will fight more. Today was just one day.”

“Every day will be like today. White men will be back, in bigger ships and in bigger numbers and with better weapons.”

“Our spirit will never die,” said Crow. “Do not let this be a weight on your back, Woodchuck.”

“I could come back. Go to the Next Time, get what we need, and come back. There are other ways to fight.”

Crow considered this. Then he said, “No. Let the seasons unfold. As they are and always will be.”

That night, small fires blazed in the deep ancient woods. In front of hasty lean-tos, clay pots of stew simmered, scenting the air. Crow and I sat by one fire and ate the pottage barehanded from wooden trenchers. The meat and corn and beans slid welcome into the empty hole of my hunger. It thrilled and sang along the cords of my body. Ellery, shocking as this may seem to you, I fully embraced the animal pleasures of eating flesh.

Next to us by the fire sat the same maiden as before. In the guttering light, she looked at me frankly now. She had seen me do battle. Her skin shone in the firelight. Her lips parted as if to speak.

Crow saw, and spoke. "There are pleasures here, and many more days ahead with the gods of the woods and the rivers," he said. "There are the pleasures of the *wetu* when you are snug from the rains and in the cold of the long snows. Pleasures in the hunt and in the cycle of the seasons, and of living by the time of the sun and the moon."

"I will stay," I said. "At home, on the other side of the smoke, in the Next Time, I am an outsider. There, I am an Indian in homespun. I don't belong."

Crow looked down for long moments.

"No," he said. "Go back and tell our story. Your stories will keep our ways alive. Without stories, my people will vanish."

The maiden stood and stepped out of the firelight. I watched as she retreated from my mortal sight. I felt a pang. An arrow point.

Crow lit the pipe again. He took the arrows out of his quiver. "I will need these," he said.

He put the quiver over my left shoulder. Into it he dropped the medicine bag of dream leaves. "But I will not need these," he said. "I have already seen the future."

Crow handed me the pipe, already smoldering fragrantly at its tip.

"You must go," he said.

I nodded to this noble man, and looked just once more at the edge of the firelight. His pretty sister in the deerskin dress was gone, swallowed by time, her words never said and mine never said.

Then I took a deep lungful of savory smoke.

"My pale brother," he said, "may the Supreme Being guide your travels."

Overpowered again by the smoke, I fell back, helpless. Beneath me was the undulant loam of the forest primeval. Above me was velvet darkness beyond high trees. Sparks from the fire lifted into the blackness and blinked like fireflies. I surrendered, and rose with the smoke.

In a moment, centuries glided past me like water in a hum of wavering blue. Then I lay near briars, on a tree-dark slope overlooking the small moon-lit lake of Walden woods.

I sat up. Nearby was the spot where my woodchuck cabin had once huddled in the trees. It was near midnight. On the pond, moon glow glittered like a fire.

I rose and walked straight home. In the houses I passed, everyone else was asleep. As they are still asleep to this day regarding what is important. In the parlor at home, I hung the quiver on a nail. I gaze at it now as I write you, Ellery.

I will see crows in the woods. But they will just be crows. They will caw, and I will feel another pang of longing. I could light a pipe with the dream leaves and transport myself back to a place and time I chose, as Crow had done.

But I am a writer. Words are my arrows. The woods are my maiden, though I see another maiden still in the light of that old fire. Perhaps making my book will help. We need to see the red face of Man, Ellery. It is our salvation.

And here I think again: Should I send you this letter by post? I think not. I am already thought of as fool enough by the good citizens of Concord. If this story gets out, you may join in the general laughter. I could not bear that.

Your friend for all time, in love and wonder,

Henry

**

Hubbard folded the letter and placed it carefully in front of him. Thoreau, he thought again, had truly been a traveler to far places after all. Concord, old and new, might be surprised where solitary men can go.

Hubbard felt deeper in the quiver. Crushed at the bottom was a small deerskin medicine bag. He took it out. Inside it were dried leaves that smelled of nutmeg and tobacco.

With a look at the door, Hubbard slipped the medicine bag into his briefcase. It was a violation of scholarly ethics. But he was no longer a scholar; he was a traveler. He put the letter in the briefcase. That was a violation too. But Thoreau, man to man, brother to brother, would understand. Only the past mattered now.

In front of Hubbard lay the quiver. It had shrunk back onto itself, a tube of weary leather, deflated and flat. The museum, he was sure, would gladly hang it on a hook, next to a label. Some future Thoreau may see it there.

Seated in the time machine of Sleepy Hollow, Hubbard mused for a few final moments. Tomorrow, after a good night's sleep, he would dress in sturdy clothing, pack a small bag, and lock the door to his little house in the Concord woods. He would drive his second-hand car to Walden Pond and leave the keys in the ignition. And yes, Hubbard reminded himself: On the way there, he needed to buy a pipe.