

ROBERT CHUTE
Heat Wave in Concord

*Dancing and laughing along the beach
came the twenty-ninth bather . . .*

I

Farmers working the fields quit early,
as much for ox or horse as for men
one old man had already died; exhausted
by heat, wrung out, wrinkled
like dried fruit.

Their women, buttoned, laced, strapped
under petticoats, skirts, sleeves,
sit and work, work and sit
in the dim, dead heat
of parlor, kitchen, and shed.

But one, an exceptional one, in
a windowless storage room, stands,
naked and white in a wash tub's cold ring.
Her cast off clothes spilled
like dried discarded flowers.

The tinned dipper lifts water, still cool
from the well, again and again. The water
passing over her body like
unseen fingers and back
to the tub again.

Perhaps one of them also dreams of the river,
of young men who float there,
pale bellies tempting the sun.

II

From houses on opposite sides
of the elm-roofed main street Henry
and Ellery, leaving dishes and scraps
of cold dinner behind,
meet, retreat to the river.

A man stands in a barn door, his shirt
stained with sweat, hat hanging slack
in his hand. A woman in the shed's
dark cave churns the morning's milk
the heat would soon sour.

They shake their heads. What beside envy
do they feel as these renegades slip away?
Do they imagine how it feels to peel
close, sweaty clothes away,
let the waters have their play?

At the river Henry explains that banks have
a gender; this one, for example, being
convex, alluvial, gradual, and
feminine; the opposite, concave,
undercut, and masculine.

Ellery makes some comments that
Henry's Journal will never repeat.
They strip and wade in.

III

Soon, by the opposite, masculine, shore, up
to their chins, they face the current.
The heat of the day is carried
down, away. They wade upstream,
wearing their hats against the sun.

They hold their bundled clothing high.
From deep holes to shallows
the water falls, rises again.
Chest, ankle, knee, belly,
chest, and down again.

Rounding a bend they see the plank bridge.
Boys, their work done, race and strip
and plunge. Boys breaching
and splashing; marble boys riding
imaginary dolphins.

On the bank one boy sits, lifting a foot
to examine some bruise, fixed
in an instant as an engraving in
an antiquities book; but subtly
colored, sunburned, bare.

The two men put on shirts now, feeling the sting
of the sun. Bridge rails bleed pitch,
the planks shrink.

IV

The drying tails of their shins stick
to their buttocks and thighs. Perhaps
because of the shirts they feel undressed,
retreat to the water. The water, like
unseen fingers, passes over them.

They wade on into a shaded, shallower reach
of late afternoon, hear the clang
of a distant bell. Some farmer's wife
signaling an early supper. They climb out
on the feminine side.

They wait for the air to dry them. How long
this single mile of fluvial walk
has seemed, passing from present
to pastoral to classical,
back to the present again.

They dress, turn toward the world of women
where mother, sister, or wife waits. The day
slides toward evening and the moon.

N.B.: Thoreau records his "fluvial walks" in the journal for 1852. He read Whitman's *Leaves Of Grass*, including, we assume, the song of the "twenty-ninth bather," in 1856. His comment: "As for the sensuality in Whitman's 'Leaves of Grass,' I do not so much wish it was not written, as that men and women were so pure that they could read it without harm."