

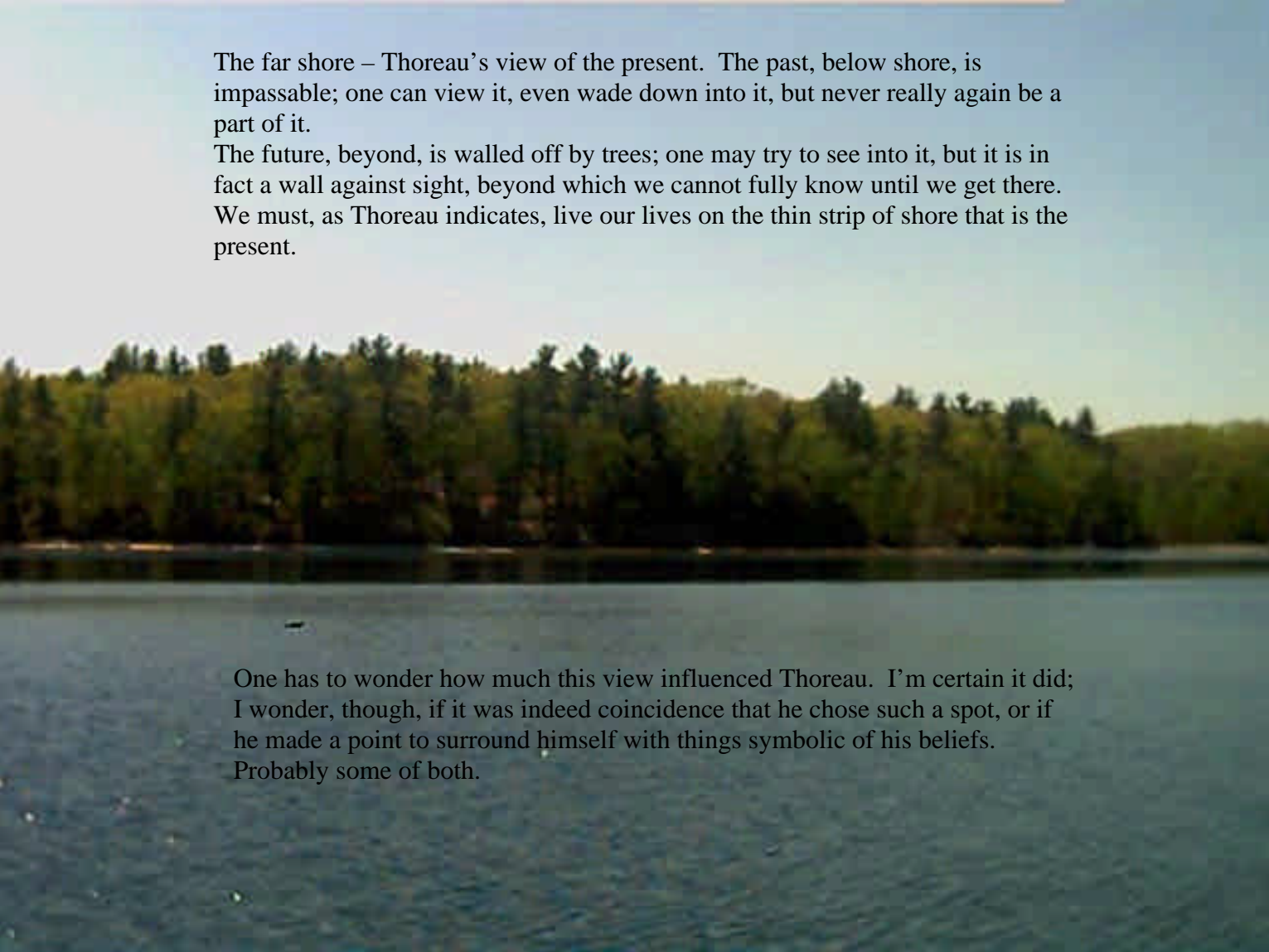


Walden

My visit to the pond

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The far shore – Thoreau’s view of the present. The past, below shore, is impassable; one can view it, even wade down into it, but never really again be a part of it.

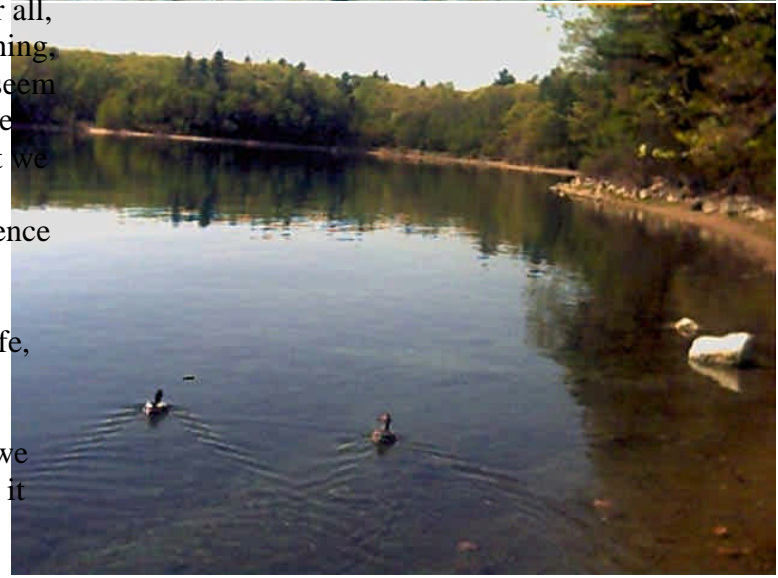
The future, beyond, is walled off by trees; one may try to see into it, but it is in fact a wall against sight, beyond which we cannot fully know until we get there. We must, as Thoreau indicates, live our lives on the thin strip of shore that is the present.

One has to wonder how much this view influenced Thoreau. I’m certain it did; I wonder, though, if it was indeed coincidence that he chose such a spot, or if he made a point to surround himself with things symbolic of his beliefs. Probably some of both.



Why this fascination with animals? The animal world seems to be notably absent in Thoreau's work, at least so far. His few animal references were intended to describe life's basic needs; animals, after all, seem to require much less than we do to live happily.

Maybe we're just curious; how, after all, can such a small thing, a frog, or a duck, seem to exemplify all the characteristics that we associate with the basis for our existence – life itself? In animals, we see a distilled form of life, uncluttered by the interwoven complexities that we seem to inject into it





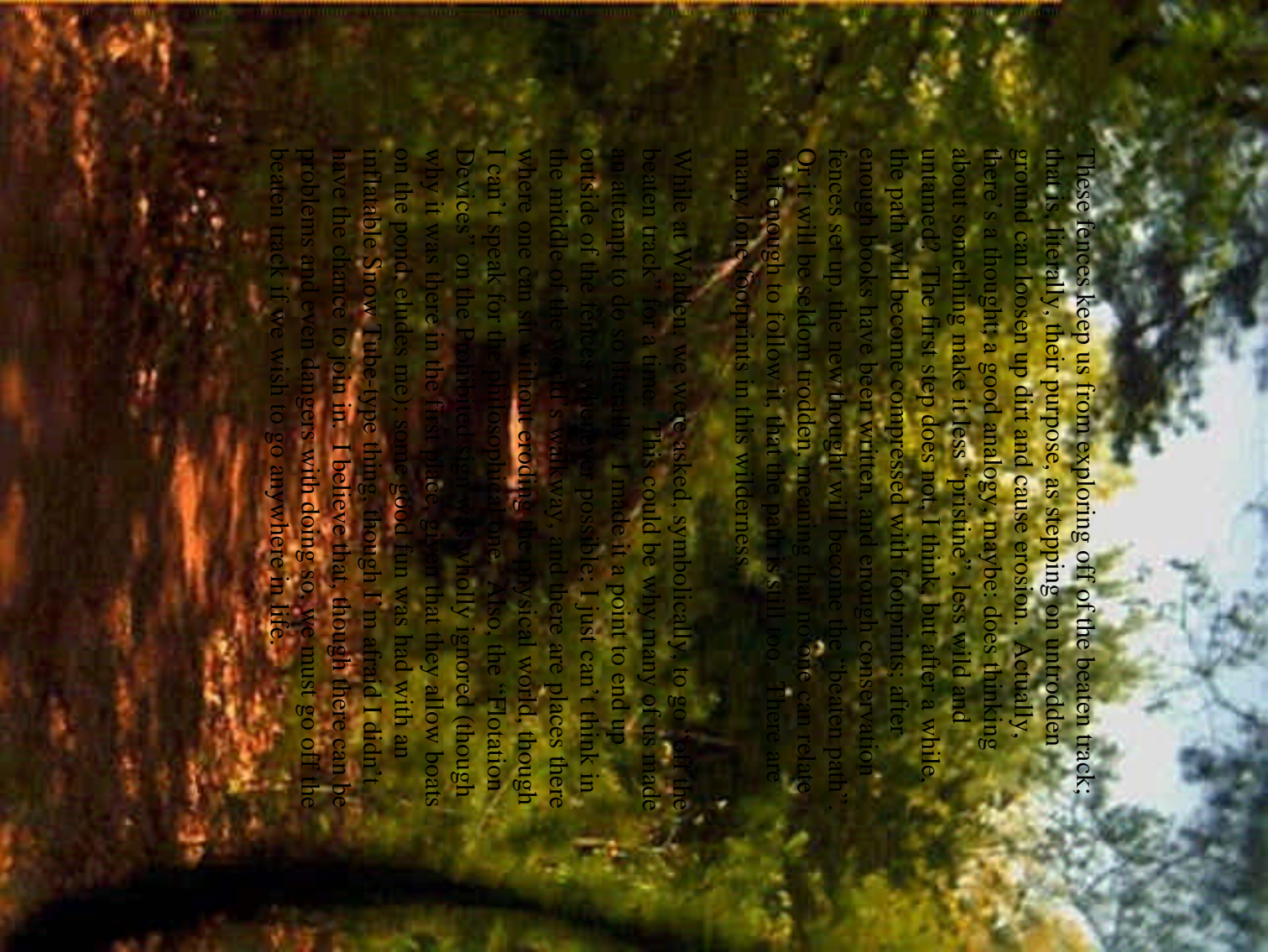
Thoreau, in his book *Walden*, argues for a simpler life. He

I took this picture just for the irony: I suspect that Thoreau would not approve of these artificial restrictions on reality, yet they are still there, at the very site of his contemplations. I understand the practical reason for this sign: to prevent damage to the pond, to keep it in pristine condition for future tourists like ourselves. The same is true of the assorted erosion efforts, and of the fences ringing the paths around the pond.

I can't recall offhand any major effort that Thoreau makes to denounce restrictions like these; then again, he lived in a time when they were much less prevalent. He wrote this book, according to the back flap of my copy, in 1845, and he published it nine years later. This was the period right before the civil war. The West was still wild; there was no conservation movement, it having been preceded by the encouraged mass consumption of land. Government was small; just after the civil war, the country would realize the disadvantages of its lack of control in the massive corruption of the late Industrial Revolution.

While I can understand the need for at least some of these restrictions, they strike me as against Thoreau's philosophy of independence and self-reliance. But I can't think of any hard evidence in favor of eliminating them, only idealistic philosophy. Maybe this time, we must concede to the practical over the idealistic.



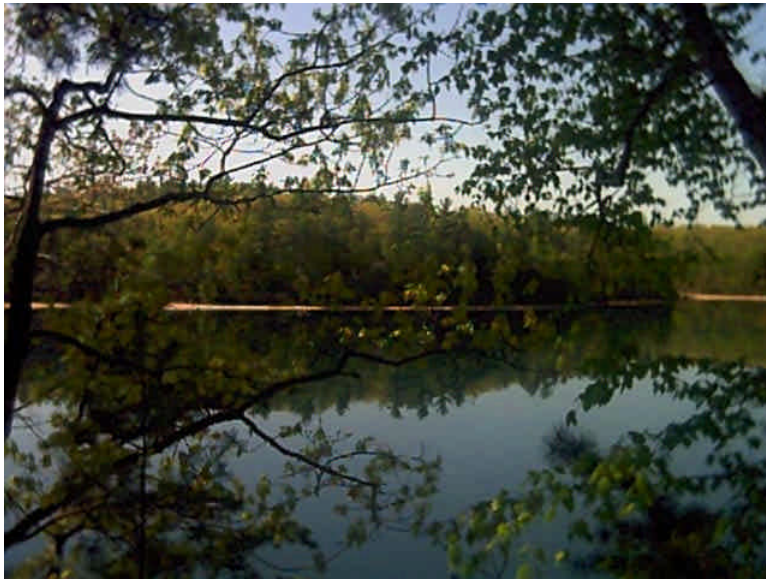


These fences keep us from exploring off of the beaten track; that is, literally, their purpose, as stepping on untrodden ground can loosen up dirt and cause erosion. Actually, there's a thought, a good analogy, maybe: does thinking about something make it less "pristine"; less wild and untamed? The first step does not, I think, but after a while, the path will become compressed with footprints; after enough books have been written, and enough conservation fences set up, the new thought will become the "beaten path". Or it will be seldom trodden, meaning that no one can relate to it enough to follow it, that the path is still too. There are many lone footprints in this wilderness.

While at Walden, we were asked, symbolically, to go "off the beaten track" for a time. This could be why many of us made an attempt to do so literally. I made it a point to end up outside of the fences whenever possible; I just can't think in the middle of the world's walkway, and there are places there where one can sit without eroding the physical world, though I can't speak for the philosophical one. Also, the "Flotation Devices" on the Prohibited sign was wholly ignored (though why it was there in the first place, given that they allow boats on the pond, eludes me); some good fun was had with an inflatable Snow Tube-type thing, though I'm afraid I didn't have the chance to join in. I believe that, though there can be problems and even dangers with doing so, we must go off the beaten track if we wish to go anywhere in life.

Well, the beach is getting crowded, and it's about time for us to go. I wonder how many people come here to think about Thoreau and Walden the book, and how many people came here just to relax in the sun. I wonder how many people come here to do both.

It's ironic, in a way, that, just as many people are starting out their day here, we're finishing up and leaving. It's reminiscent of the life of a student; at least, the student life that we are given here at DS. We're expected, and we expect ourselves, to do everything, and to do it all by 2:15 so we can do so again before bedtime. I don't know if Thoreau's philosophy would approve; he accepts people driving themselves for a purpose, but what, after all, are we working for?





- The End -