

From “The Art of Seeing Things,” *Leaf and Tendril*, 1908

I do not purpose to attempt to tell my reader how to see things, but only to talk about the art of seeing things, as one might talk of any other art. One might discourse about the art of poetry, or of painting, or of oratory, without any hope of making one’s readers or hearers poets or painters or orators.

The science of anything may be taught or acquired by study; the art of it comes by practice or inspiration. The art of seeing things is not something that may be conveyed in rules and precepts; it is a matter vital in the eye and ear, yea, in the mind and soul, of which these are the organs. I have as little hope of being able to tell the reader how to see things as I would have in trying to tell him how to fall in love or to enjoy his dinner. Either he does or he does not, and that is about all there is of it. (Walker, p. 3)

If I were to name the three most precious resources of life, I should say books, friends, and nature; and the greatest of these, at least the most constant and always at hand, is nature. Nature we have always with us, an inexhaustible storehouse of that which moves the heart, appeals to the mind, and fires the imagination—health to the body, a stimulus to the intellect, and joy to the soul.

John Burroughs, “The Art of Seeing Things,” *Leaf and Tendril*, 1908

From "Sharp Eyes," *Locusts and Wild Honey*, 1879

Little dramas and tragedies and comedies, little characteristic scenes, are always being enacted in the lives of the birds, if our eyes are sharp enough to see them. (Walker, p. 17)

I was much amused one summer day in seeing a bluebird feeding her young one in the shaded street of a large town. She had captured a cicada or harvest-fly, and after bruising it a while on the ground flew with it to a tree and placed it in the beak of the young bird. It was a large morsel, and the mother seemed to have doubts of her chick's ability to dispose of it, for she stood near and watched its efforts with great solicitude. The young bird struggled valiantly with the cicada, but made no headway in swallowing it, when the mother took it from him and flew to the sidewalk, and proceeded to break and bruise it more thoroughly. Then she again placed it in his beak, and seemed to say, "There, try it now," and sympathized so thoroughly with his efforts that she repeated many of his motions and contortions. But the great fly was unyielding, and, indeed, seemed ridiculously disproportioned to the beak that held it. The young bird fluttered and fluttered, and screamed, "I'm stuck, I'm stuck," till the anxious parent again seized the morsel and carried it to an iron railing, where she came down upon it for the space of a minute with all the force and momentum her beak could command. Then she offered it to her young a third time, but with the same result as before, except that this time the bird dropped it; but she was to the ground as soon as the cicada was, and taking it in her beak flew some distance to a high board fence where she sat motionless for some moments. While pondering the problem how that fly should be broken, the male bluebird approached her, and said very plainly, and I thought rather curtly, "Give me that bug," but she quickly resented his interference and flew farther away, where she sat apparently quite discouraged when I last saw her. (Walker, pp. 17-18)

From "The Bluebird," *Wake-Robin*, 1871

When nature made the bluebird she wished to propitiate both the sky and the earth, so she gave him the color of the one on his back and the hue of the other on his breast, and ordained that his appearance in spring should denote that the strife and war between these two elements was at an end. He is the peace-harbinger; in him the celestial and terrestrial strike hands and are fast friends. He means the furrow and he means the warmth; he means all the soft, wooing influences of the spring on the one hand, and the retreating footsteps of winter on the other.

It is sure to be a bright March morning when you first hear his note; and it is as if the milder influences up above had found a voice and let a word fall upon your ear, so tender is it and so prophetic, a hope tinged with a regret. (Walker, p. 49)

From “Speckled Trout,” *Locusts and Wild Honey*, 1879

But I early learned that from almost any stream in a trout country the true angler could take trout, and that the great secret was this, that, whatever bait you used, worm, grasshopper, grub, or fly, there was one thing you must always put upon your hook, namely, your heart; when you bait your hook with your heart, the first always bite; they will jump clear from the water after it; they will dispute with each other over it; it is a morsel they love above everything else. With such bait I have seen the born angler (my grandfather was one) take a noble string of trout from the most unpromising waters, and on the most unpromising day. He used his hood so coyly and tenderly, he approached the fish with such address and insinuation, he divined the exact spot where they lay; if they were playful and coquettish, he would suit his mood to theirs; if they were frank and sincere, he met them halfway; he was so patient and considerate, so entirely devoted to pleasing the critical trout, and so successful in his efforts—surely his heart was upon his hook—and it was a tender, unctuous heart, too, as that of every angler is. (Walker, p. 59)

From “Phases of Farm Life,” *Signs and Seasons*, 1886

Blessed is he whose youth was passed upon the farm, and if it was a dairy farm, his memories will be all the more fragrant. The driving of the cows to and from the pasture, every day and every season for years—how much of summer and of nature he got into him on these journeys! What rambles and excursions did this errand furnish the excuse for! The birds and birds’ nests, the berries, the squirrels, the woodchucks, the beech woods with their grant wintergreens and a hundred nameless adventures, all strung upon that brief journey of half a mile to and from the remote pastures. (Walker, p. 90)

From "In Green Alaska," *Far and Near*, 1904

Many of these Alaskan glaciers are rapidly melting and are now but the fragments of their former selves. From observations made here twenty years ago by John Muir, it is known that the position of the front of the Muir Glacier at that time was about two miles below its present position, which would indicate a rate of recession of about one mile in ten years.

What we saw on that June afternoon was a broken and crumbling wall of ice two hundred and fifty feet high in our front, stretching across the inlet and running down to a low, dirty, crumbling line where it ended on the shore on our left, and where it disappeared behind high gray gravelly banks on our right. The inlet near the glacier was choked with icebergs.

What is that roar or explosion that salutes our ears before our anchor has found bottom? It is the downpour of an enormous mass of ice from the glacier's front, making it for the moment as active as Niagara. Other and still other downpours follow at intervals of a few minutes, with deep explosive sounds and the rising up of great clouds of spray and we quickly realize that here is indeed a new kind of Niagara, a cataract the like of which we have not before seen, a mighty congealed river that discharges into the bay intermittently in ice avalanches that shoot down its own precipitous front. (Walker, p. 106)

From *Under the Apple Trees*, 1916

As I write these lines in my leafy tent, a chipmunk comes in, foraging for his winter supplies. I have brought him cherry-pits and peach-pits and cracked wheat, from time to time, and now he calls on me several times a day. His den is in the orchard but a few yards from me, and I enjoy having him for so near a neighbor. He has at last become so familiar that he climbs to my lap, then to the table, then to my shoulder and head, looking for the kernels of popcorn that he is convinced have some perennial source of supply near me or about me. He clears up every kernel, and then on his return, in a few minutes, there they are again! I might think him a good deal puzzled by the prompt renewal of the supply if I were to read my own thoughts into his little noddle, but I see he is only eager to gather his harvest while it is plentiful and so near at hand. No, he is not influenced even by that consideration; he does not consider at all, in fact, but just goes for the corn in nervous eagerness and haste. Yet, if he does not reflect, he certainly has a wisdom and foresight of his own. (Walker, p. 154)

How furtive and nervous my chipmunk is, rushing about by little jerks incessantly, not stopping for anything! His bright, unwinking eyes, his palpitating body, his sudden spasmodic movements, his eagerness, his industry, his sleekness and cleanliness—what a picture he makes! Apparently he does not know me from a stump or a clothes-horse. His cold paws on my warm hand, on my arm, or on my head give him no hint of danger; no odors from my body, or look from my eyes, disturb him; the sound of my voice does not alarm him; but any movement on my part, and he is off. It is *moving* things—cats, weasels, hawks, foxes—that mean danger to him. In the little circuit of his life—gathering his winter stores and his daily subsistence, spinning along the fences, threading the woods and bushes, his eye and his ear are evidently his main dependence; odors and still objects concern him little, but moving things very much. (Walker, p. 156)

From "Reading the Book of Nature," *Ways of Nature*, 1905

In studying nature, the important thing is not so much what we see as how we interpret what we see. Do we get at the true meaning of the facts? Do we draw the right inference? The fossils in the rocks were long observed before men drew the right inference from them. So with a hundred other things in nature and life. (Walker, p. 164)

During May and a part of June of 1903, a drouth of unusual severity prevailed throughout the land. The pools and marshes nearly all dried up. Late in June the rains came again and filled them up. Then an unusual thing happened: suddenly, for two or three days and nights, the marshes about me were again vocal with the many voices of the hyla, the "peepers" of early spring. That is the fact. Now, what is the interpretation? With me the peepers become silent in early May, and, I suppose, leave the marshes for their life in the woods. Did the drouth destroy all their eggs and young, and did they know this and so come back to try again? How else shall one explain their second appearance in the marshes? But how did they know of the destruction of their young, and how can we account for their concerted action? These are difficulties not easily overcome. A more rational explanation to me is this, namely, that the extreme dryness of the woods—nearly two months without rain—drove the little frogs to seek for moisture in their spring haunts, where in places a little water would be pretty certain to be found. Here they are holding out, probably hibernating again, as such creatures do in the tropics during the dry season, when the rains came, and here again they sent up their spring chorus of voices, and, for aught I know, once more deposited their eggs. This to me is much more like the ways of Nature with her creatures than is the theory of the frogs' voluntary return to the swamps and pools to start the season over again. (Walker, p. 164)

In the familiar sight of a pair of crows foraging with their young about a field in summer, one of our nature writers sees the old birds giving their young a lesson in flying. She says that the most important thing that the elders had to do was to teach the youngsters how to fly. This they did by circling about the pasture, giving a peculiar call while they were followed by their flock—all but one. This was a bobtailed crow, and he did not obey the word of command. His mother took note of his disobedience and proceeded to discipline him. He stood upon a big stone, and she came down upon him and knocked him off his perch. “He squawked and fluttered his wings to keep from falling, but the blow came so suddenly that he had not time to save himself, and he fell flat on the ground. In a minute he clambered back upon his stone, and I watched him closely. The next time the call came to fly he did not linger, but went with the rest, and so long as I could watch him he never disobeyed again.” I should interpret this fact of the old and young crows flying about a field in summer quite differently. The young are fully fledged, and are already strong flyers when this occurs. They do not leave the nest until they can fly well and need no tutoring. What the writer really saw was what anyone may see on the farm in June and July: she saw the parent crows foraging with their young in a field. The old birds flew about followed by their brood, clamorous for the food which their parents found. The bobtailed bird, which had probably met with some accident, did not follow, and the mother returned to feed it; the young crow lifted its wings and flapped them, and in its eagerness probably fell off its perch; then when its parents flew away, it followed.

John Burroughs, “Reading the Book of Nature,” *Ways of Nature*, 1905

Few men were so deeply impressed by our Civil War as Whitman. It aroused all his patriotism, all his sympathies, and, as a poet, tested his power to deal with great contemporary events and scenes. He was first drawn to the seat of war on behalf of his brother, Lieutenant-Colonel George W. Whitman, 51st New York Volunteers, who was wounded by the fragment of a shell at Fredericksburg. This was in the fall of 1862. This brought him in contact with the sick and wounded soldiers, and henceforth, as long as the war lasts and longer, he devoted his time and substance to ministering to them. The first two or three years of his life in Washington he supported himself by correspondence with Northern newspapers, mainly with the *New York Times*.

John Burroughs, *Whitman: A Study*, 1896

From "An Egotistical Chapter," *Indoor Studies*, 1889

I early took pleasure in trying to express myself on paper, probably in my sixteenth or seventeenth year. In my reading I was attracted by everything of the essay kind. In the libraries and bookstores I was on the lookout for books of essays. And I wanted the essay to start not in a casual and inconsequential way, but the first sentence must be a formal enunciation of a principle.

It was while I was at school, in my nineteenth year, that I saw my first author; and I distinctly remember with what emotion I gazed upon him, and followed him in the twilight, keeping on the other side of the street. He was of little account—a man who had failed as a lawyer, and then had written a history of Poland, which I have never heard of since that time; but to me he was the embodiment of the August spirit of authorship, and I looked upon him with more reverence and enthusiasm than I had ever looked before upon any man. I do not think I could have approached and spoken to him on any consideration. I cannot at this date divine why I should have stood in such worshipful fear and awe of this obscure individual, but I suppose it was the instinctive tribute of a timid and imaginative youth to a power which he was just beginning vaguely to see—the power of letters. (Walker, p. 210)

From *My Boyhood*

The first seventeen years of my life were spent on the farm where I was born (1837-1854); the next ten years I was a teacher in rural district schools (1854-1864); then I was for ten years a government clerk in Washington (1864-1873); then in the summer of 1873, while a national bank examiner and bank receiver, I purchased the small fruit farm on the Hudson where you were brought up and where I have since lived, cultivating the land for marketable fruit and the fields and woods for nature literature, as you well know. I have gotten out of my footpaths a few times and traversed some of the great highways of travel—have been twice to Europe, going only as far as Paris (1871 and 1882)—the first time sent to London by the Government with three other men to convey \$50,000,000 of bonds to be refunded; the second time going with my family on my own account. I was a member of the Harriman expedition to Alaska in the summer of 1899, going as far as Plover Bay on the extreme N.E. part of Siberia. I was the companion of President Roosevelt on a trip to Yellowstone Park in the spring of 1905. In the winter and spring of 1909 I went to California with two women friends and extended the journey to the Hawaiian Islands, returning home in June. In 1911 I again crossed the continent of California. I have camped and tramped in Maine and in Canada, and have spent part of a winter in Bermuda and in Jamaica. ... (Walker, pp. 260-261)

My books are, in a way, a record of my life—that part of it that came to flower and fruit in my mind. You could reconstruct my days pretty well from these volumes. A writer who gleans his literary harvest in the fields and woods reaps mainly where he has sown himself. He is a husbandman whose crop springs from the seed of his own heart.

(Walker, p. 261)

My life has been a fortunate one; I was born under a luck star. It seems as if both wind and tide had favoured me. I have suffered no great losses, or defeats, or illness, or accidents, and have undergone no great struggles or privations; I have had no grouch, I have not wanted the earth. I am pessimistic by night, but by day I am a confirmed optimist, and it is the days that have stamped my life. I have found this planet a good corner of the universe to live in and I am not in a hurry to exchange it for any other. (Walker, p. 261)

Father and Mother had a pretty hard struggle to pay for the farm and to clothe and feed and school us all. We lived off the products of the farm to an extent that people do not think of doing nowadays. Not only was our food largely home grown but our clothes also were home grown and home spun.

From "The Crow," *Ways of Nature*

Noisy, scheming, and predacious,
With demeanor almost gracious,

Dowered with leisure, void of hurry,
Void of fuss and void of worry,

Friendly bandit, Robin Hood,
Judge and jury of the wood,

Or Captain Kidd of sable quill,
Hiding treasures in the hill,

Nature made thee for each season,
Gave thee wit for ample reason

Good crow wit that's always burnished
Like the coat her care has furnished.

May thy numbers ne'er diminish,
I'll befriend thee till life's finish.

May I never cease to meet thee,
May I never have to eat thee.

And mayest thou never have to fare so
That thou playest the part of scarecrow.

(Walker, p. 76)

From "The Exhilarations of the Road," *Winter Sunshine*, 1875

I do not think I exaggerate the importance or the charms of pedestrianism, or our need as a people to cultivate the art. I think it would tend to soften the national manners, to teach us the meaning of leisure, to acquaint us with the charms of the open air, to strengthen and foster the tie between the race and the land. No one else looks out upon the world so kindly and charitably as the pedestrian; no one else gives and takes so much from the country he passes through. Next to the laborer in the fields, the walker holds the closest relation to the soil; and he holds a closer and more vital relation to nature because he is freer and his mind more at leisure. (Walker, p. 47)

From "A Sharp Lookout," *Signs and Seasons*, 1886

One has only to sit down in the woods or the fields, or by the shore of the river or the lake, and nearly everything of interest will come round to him,—the birds, the animals, the insects; and presently, after his eye has got accustomed to the place, and to the light and shade, he will probably see some plant or flower that he has sought in vain, and that is a pleasant surprise to him. So, on a large scale, the student and lover of nature has this advantage over people who gad up and down the world, seeking some novelty or excitement; he has only to stay at home and see the procession pass. The great globe swings around to him like a revolving showcase; the change of the seasons is like the passage of strange and new countries; the zones of the earth, with all their beauties and marvels, pass one's door, and linger long in the passing. What a voyage is this we make without leaving for a night our own fireside! (*Signs and Seasons*, p. 3)

...the place to observe nature is where you are; the walk to take today is the walk you took yesterday. You will not find just the same things: both the observed and the observer have changed; the ship is on another tack in both cases.

I shall probably never see another just such day as yesterday was, because one can never exactly repeat his observation,—cannot turn the leaf of the book of life backward,—and because each day has characteristics of its own. (*Signs and Seasons*, p. 6)

From "Fuss and Feathers," ??

Probably we have no other familiar bird keyed up to the same degree of intensity as the house wren. He seems to be the one bird whose cup of life is always overflowing. The wren is habitually in an ecstasy either of delight or of rage. He probably gets on the nerves of more persons than any other of our birds. He is so shrilly and overflowingly joyous, or else so sharply and harshly angry and pugnacious—a lyrical burst one minute, and a volley of chiding, staccato notes the next. More restless than the wind, he is a tiny dynamo of bird energy." (*The Birds of John Burroughs*, p. 175)

From "Talks with Young Observers," *Riverby*

Let the young observer follow up and identify any one bird, and he will be surprised to find how his love and enthusiasm for birds will kindle. He will not stop with the one bird. Carlyle wrote in a letter to his brother, "Attempt to explain what you do know, and you already know something more." Bring what powers of observation you already have to bear upon animate nature, and already your powers are increased. You can double your capital and more in a single season." (*Riverby*, p. 324)

From *The Heart of Burroughs's Journals*

April 9, 1859--My friend Herder is like some springs: you can get very clear, pretty talk out of him with a small cup and by not dipping near the surface, but sink down in him the bucket of a sound philosophical question and he is so roiled that you will not be able to get a clear draught from him again in a day or two. (Journals, p. 15)

April 13, 1877—Friday morning at six o'clock I left Roxbury for the down train. Mother got me my breakfast. The boys and Father were in the stable milking. As I turned to take a parting view of home out on the knoll, I saw Father and Hiram emerging from the stable door with the pails of milk. Charley was going up the steps; the robins sang loud up in the sugar-bush, where a bucket, just smitten by the sun, sent back a tinny flash. The snow, dirty and disheveled, belted the side of the hill above the house. I went down across the lots. It was a typical April morning: the sunlight white, the trees nude, the fields bare and sere. How the sparrows sang! How the robins laughed! How the phoebe-birds called! (Journals, pp. 69-70)

September 26, 1883--

Finished Darwin's "Origin of the Species" last night. A true wonder-book. Few pages in modern scientific literature so noble as those last few pages of the book. Everything about Darwin indicates the master. In reading him you breathe the air of the largest and most serene mind. Every naturalist before him, and with him, he lays under contribution; every competent observer in every field. Only the greatest minds can do this as he does it. He furnishes the key to every man's knowledge. Those that oppose his theory unwittingly bring some fact or observation that fits into his scheme. His theory has such range; accounts for such a multitude of facts; easily underruns and outruns the views of all other naturalists. He is, in his way, as great and as remarkable as Shakespeare, and utilizes the knowledge of mankind in the same way. (Journals, p. 100-101)

September 27, 1883--

Walt Whitman came yesterday, and his presence and companionship act like a cordial upon me that nearly turns my head. The great bard on my right hand, and the sea upon my left—the thoughts of the one equally grand with the suggestions and elemental heave of the other. From any point of view Whitman is impressive. The slope of the back of his head, and shoulders, and back, how suggestive! You would know that he was an extraordinary man. (Journals, p. 101)

September 29, 1883--

Long autumn days by the sea with Whitman. Much and copious talk. His presence loosens my tongue, that has been so long tied since I came here, in a remarkable manner. I feel as if under the effect of some rare tonic or cordial all the time. There is something grainy and saline in him, as in the voice of the sea. Sometimes his talk is choppy and confused, or elliptical and unfinished, and then again there comes a long, splendid roll of thought that bathes one from head to foot, or swings you quite from your moorings. (Journals, p. 102)

From "The Invitation," *Wake-Robin*, 1871

Years ago, when quite a youth, I was rambling in the woods one Sunday, with my brothers, gathering black birch, wintergreens, etc., when, as we reclined upon the ground, gazing vaguely up into the trees, I caught sight of a bird, that paused a moment on a branch above me, the like of which I had never before seen or heard of. It was probably the blue yellow-backed warbler, as I have since found this to be a common bird in those woods; but to my young fancy it seemed like some fairy bird, so curiously marked was it, and so new and unexpected. I saw it a moment as the flickering leaves parts, noted the white spot on its wing, and it was gone. How the thought of it clung to me afterward! It was a revelation. It was the first intimation I had had that the woods we knew so well held birds that we knew not at all.

From "The Spring Bird Procession," *Field and Study*, 1919

In my boyhood the vast armies of the passenger pigeons were one of the most notable spring tokens. Often late in March, or early in April, the naked beechwoods would suddenly become blue with them, and vocal with their soft, childlike calls; or all day the sky would be streaked with the long lines or dense masses of the moving armies. The last great flight of them that I ever beheld was on the 10th of April, 1875, when, for the greater part of the day, one could not at any moment look skyward above the Hudson River Valley without seeing several flocks, great and small, of the migrating birds. But that spectacle was never repeated as it had been for generations before. The pigeons never came back. Death and destruction, in the shape of the greed and cupidity of man, were on their trail. (Walker, p. 171)

From "Wild Life about My Cabin," *Far and Near*, 1904

The chickadees we have always with us. They are like the evergreens among the trees and plants. Winter has no terrors for them. They are properly wood-birds, but the groves and orchards know them also. Did they come near my cabin for better protection, or did they chance to find a little cavity in a tree there that suited them? Branch-builders and ground-builders are easily accommodated, but the chickadee must find a cavity, and a small one at that. The woodpeckers make a cavity when a suitable trunk or branch is found, but the chickadee, with its small, sharp beak, rarely does so; it usually smooths and deepens one already formed. This a pair did a few yards from my cabin.

From "Springs," *Pepacton*, 1881

Indeed, a spring is always an oasis in the desert of the fields. It is a creative and generative centre. It attracts all things to itself,—the grasses, the mosses, the flowers, the wild plants, the great trees. The walker finds it out, the camping party seek it, the pioneer builds his hut or his house near it. When the settler or squatter has found a good spring, he has found a good place to begin life; he has found the fountain-head of much that he is seeking in this world. (*Pepacton*, p. 41)

A man who came back to the place of his birth in the East, after an absence of a quarter of a century in the West, said the one thing he most desired to see about the old homestead was the spring. This, at least, he would find unchanged. Here his lost youth would come back to him. The faces of his father and mother he might not look upon; but the face of the spring, that had mirrored theirs and his own so ofte, he fondly imagined would beam on him as of old. I can well believe that, in that all but springless country in which he had cast his lot, the vision, the remembrance of the fountain that flowed by his father's doorway, so prodigal of its precious gifts, had awakened in him the keenest longings and regrets. (*Pepacton*, p. 39)

From *Whitman: A Study*

The more I saw of Whitman, and the more I studied his "Leaves," the more significance I found in both, and the clearer it became to me that a new type of a man and a new departure in poetic literature were here foreshadowed. There was something forbidding, but there was something vital and grand back of it. I found to be true what the poet said of himself—

"Bearded, sunburnt, gray-neck'd, forbidding. I have arrived.

To be wrestled with as I pass for the solid prizes of the universe,

For such I afford whoever can persevere to win them. (*Whitman*, p. 7)

From *All Souls*, "Fragments from the Table of an Intellectual Epicure" in the *Saturday Press*, a small New York literary journal (circa 1859)

"Every book and every sermon ought to be a pair of magnetic slippers that shall make us dance to a new tune, and feel as if we were walking on thunderbolts. There is nothing so healthy as a freshet in the soul. A man needs to be elated and depressed; to be lifted up until he feels he could grab the big dipper and . . . sunk down till one foot breaks through Hades." (*Renahan*, p. 50)

From "Waiting," *My Boyhood*
The waters know their own, and draw
The brook that springs in yonder heights;
So flows the good with equal law
Unto the soul of pure delights.

The stars come nightly to the sky;
The tidal wave comes to the sea;
Nor time, nor space, nor deep, nor high,
Can keep my own away from me.

From "Bird Life in an Old Apple-Tree," *Riverby*, 1894
I have spoken of the broods of the great crested flycatchers that have been reared in the old apple-tree. This is by no means a common bird, and as it destroys many noxious insects, I look upon it with a friendly eye, though it is the most uncouth and unmusical of the flycatchers. Indeed, among the other birds of the garden and orchard it seems quite like a barbarian. It has a harsh, froglike scream, form and manners to suit, and is clad in a suit of butternut brown. It seeks a cast-off snakeskin to weave into its nest, and not finding one, will take an onion skin, a piece of oiled paper, or large fish scales. (*Riverby*, 298)