Outside the national imagination, former slaves squat in Walden Woods long before Thoreau will live deliberately for two years, two months, two days.

It’s 1845 and in the green solitude of Concord reigns silence and song as Zilpah White spins linen in her one-room shack squeezed onto the narrow edge of public road, dogs and hens for company, until English soldiers set fire to her cabin and the animals burn. Few women leave former slave owners and fewer live alone, in this town that owes Zilpah nothing. She rebuilds years before Thoreau will blaze hundreds of acres one afternoon trying to roast fish in the cropless sand, smoke clogging the pines like cotton. Outcast forest-burner, he will live and write about the Walden that was black before he got there. But her breath, in search of a different solace, fuels the trees that soar above the pond, keep watch over new life. That might, thrive.

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