

Fire in the Woods

By Sarah Terrazano

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 cropland 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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