

Free Will: A Consideration

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*Providence has a wild, rough, incalculable  
road.*

—Ralph Waldo Emerson

### **Prelude**

*The flying godwit  
soars 8000 miles nonstop  
from Alaska to China's Yellow River.  
It's not its resilience we most admire  
nor its sheer hardheadedness;  
it's the calculus, some bird radar  
pulling it forward, a threaded  
needle, its eye way above  
water*

### **Winter Work**

Waldo waits for the water to freeze before walking across  
the Great River to arrive in  
Kalamazoo or wherever next  
he will speak. Even so, the chill  
wind invades his cloak, his scarf,  
and threatens his gait. He slides.  
Last week, as he stood tall, patient,  
before a crowd somewhere, someone  
said he resembled a *perpendicular coffin*.  
Well, yes: hidden behind the comfort

of aphorism and the blazing quilt  
of certainty, his spirit has plummeted,  
careened from transcendence  
by the death of a child, his own,  
the hurt seamed into his heart, still  
pulsating, one lyceum after another,  
through one lecture, maybe two,  
another day x'd off the calendar.

### **An Interlude**

*Free will, Nabokov writes  
in a sly and caustic note,  
"snaps its rainbow fingers"  
to dispute our every doubt.  
Perhaps. Yet we must consider  
going this way or that, the paths  
tangled where we least suspect.  
Sometimes we're blown about,  
buffeted into fearsome lands,  
labyrinthine folds, no string  
to sift, no needle to thread.  
Other times we feel we're saved,  
borne up on spirit we neither  
know nor understand.*

### **Spring**

*Every spirit makes its house, but afterwards the  
house confines the spirit.*

—Ralph Waldo Emerson

After the heavy rains, a pinch  
of light through the trees, and then a vibrant seam  
of color as the evening swells

robust, a fine suture  
of sun and calm.

The scholar sits still,  
as though before an altar,  
to what god he does not know.  
The old robes don't fit:  
they're yesterday's choices  
and a bit threadbare.  
When one's words are etched  
into platitude, embroidered  
as fact, is one not bound  
and gagged and lost?  
What a strange knot  
in the golden thread of a life  
exemplary to a fault!

### ***A Postlude, Lightsome***

*Lidian, wife of Waldo, who called  
him Mr. E for half a century,  
might be deemed a sentimental  
fool: In concern for a rat caught  
in the chimney she placed  
bread and cheese there.  
She so fretted that her chickens'  
feet were cold in those northern  
winters (even her own blanket  
failed to warm their scaly toes),  
that her graceless friend  
Henry David, ever adept  
at construction, stitched  
for them leather shoes.*