To Judge the Living and the Dead

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When reading Walden, the students rage—rage—against Thoreau, like the man shot their dogs one by one, gangland-style. They call him a fake, a phony, a poseur when they find out his cabin was only a mile or two from town; call him an idiot for the whole enterprise; call him a nerd for having no friends, a loser for his experiment in isolation.

But would the students say the same if Thoreau, in the manner they’ve grown up with, had divulged his personal business first, if the book didn’t start with “When I wrote the following pages, or rather the bulk of them, I lived alone, in the woods,” but with “After my best friend, my brother John, died—RIP, JT—I needed to be alone, to build something, to tend some beans, just to tend some beans for awhile, you know?” instead?

Would they try so hard to outdo each other’s bile if they paused to remember that he was a person, like each and every one of us—a person with a heart made of mixed media—part steel but part cardboard, part stoic oak but part decrepit spider web—first?

—Mitchell Nobis

Mitchell Nobis is a teacher and English department chair at Seaholm High School in Birmingham, Michigan. He is the current president of the Michigan Council of Teachers of English and is a co-director of the Red Cedar Writing Project. He lives in Farmington, Michigan, where he and his wife spend their spare time playing baseball and basketball with their sons.

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