

## *Vivian Shipley*

### ICE FISHING IN MINNESOTA

You're in walleye world if, as thoughts grow stranger  
and stranger, you forget you failed basic math.

Drive past rows of fish houses on Mille Lacs.

Two hundred square miles, with ice three feet thick

adds up to 17 billion cubic feet of ice. If one foot  
weighs 50 pounds, ice totals 850 billion pounds,  
in mammal units, the equivalent of 53 million  
mature African bull elephants. Add two feet of snow,

times 200. Remember moisture content varies. Hard  
to say how much that snow weighs. You  
call it a lot. Maybe 348 billion pounds or 22  
million more elephants stampeding Mille Lacs already

burdened with 5,000 ice houses outfitted with anglers,  
pickups, snowmobiles, generators. Stop.

Get a grip. Mantra Henry David Thoreau's  
*Simplify, simplify*. Appeal of a fish house is cobbling

found wood, fulfilling rectangular fantasies in plywood,  
chipboard, scrap paneling. You could be right  
back in Harlan County with your uncles gathering  
like they were holding a construction convention on

outhouses or in a Hooverville from the Great Depression.

Borrowing an ax and boards from an Irish  
friend's shanty, Thoreau built his home for  
\$28.12 1/2. The 10 by 15 space was smaller than most

of Minnesota's fish houses. If Walden Pond had not  
been shorn of ice by *Hyperborean* ice-cutters  
each winter, Thoreau could have towed what  
Emerson must have secretly labeled *shack* onto the ice.

Puncturing the skin of Walden Pond to fish for pickerel,  
Thoreau might not have written about his root  
cellar but described his hole as *a sort of porch at  
the entrance of a burrow*. Starting to get strange, walleye

again, you can't stop yourself. Calculating Thoreau's  
weight, you multiply it pressing downward  
on the dark body of Walden. Control gone,  
you hallucinate: Thoreau in Mille Lacs, fishing mostly

by feel, partly by sight; Thoreau in ice-house hypnosis,  
with the long distance stare that comes from  
focusing on what won't focus: the indeterminate  
place in water where the line trails off into uncharted depths.