

Song of Thunder

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"Song Of Thunder" (an Ojibway song)

Sometimes
I go about pitying
Myself
While I am carried by the wind
Across the sky.

ARISE YE WRETCHED—every day for nine months I walked past this graffito written in red spray paint on the science building. The command never failed to stop me, to amuse me, and to depress me (in that order). John and I had just been married, and, as these things somehow always seemed to work out, it was I who had reluctantly tagged along after him rather than the reverse. We had moved to south Chicago so he could attend the university there. The Southside was a wasteland: block after block of housing projects and slums, swirling trash, police sirens, shrieking ambulances, noxious industrial pollution from Gary, Indiana. It was a place without hope for the millions who lived there. Most would be born, live, and die in the same original squalor. Here, the chief cause of death among young men and women was murder. Amidst this sordid unhappiness was the university, an ivory tower, mocking it all. At first, I had hoped the Southside would be all right, but my hope soon dissipated. I was mugged riding my bicycle in broad daylight. I could not walk alone at night. I felt trapped, stuck, caged.

June finally came, summer vacation. By then John and I were hardly speaking to each other—speaking turned too quickly to fighting. Something had to change. A reconciliation was in order. But how? Where? I suggested we get outdoors, go canoeing. John agreed.

After contacting an outfitter, we drove north in our little car, holding our breath waiting for it to break down. When the speedometer clicked past a 100,000 miles and started over again without mishap, John and I relaxed. It seemed an order had come from out of nowhere—our luck had changed. We even dared to exchange a few words with each other. From Chicago to Ely, Minnesota was a long drive. We stopped and camped the first night in a campground, bumbling around at midnight setting up our old tent. Although it was a run-of-the-mill campground with separate areas for r.v.'s and tents, I felt as if I were already in the wilderness. Pine forest was all around us; its sharp scent jostled my brain taking me back to happy times—camping in Colorado, hiking in northern New Mexico. For a moment I swore Chicago had merely been a nightmare.

Minnesota (in Sioux, milky blue water) was a state I hadn't visited before. It was beautiful, made up of water and pine, of fish and moose, and had the only substantial (if you can call it that) wolf population in the lower forty-eight. L. David Mech had been studying the wolves there in the Boundary Waters area for some time. I wanted to see a wolf. It was unlikely I would. Wolves traveled in packs only in winter, and it was then they were most visible. By early summer the packs would have broken up and the individual wolf families would be busy raising their pups, for in summer it was safest for them to be quiet and invisible. Quiet and invisible, that's how it seemed I'd been for these last nine months. Quiet and invisible, slinking along dark city streets hoping I was safe, at least for the moment. I had gone underground; I had been in hiding, and now I was going to come back up into the light. The following morning John and I stepped into our Mylar canoe, waved goodbye to the outfitter, and paddled away.

Day 1

A crescent moon rises over still water. We have camped on a small island in Lost Bay and sit on a rock promontory looking out across the water. The mosquitoes are "so big that they wear baby doll clothes," just as the canoe outfitter warned us, and we wave them away from our faces. Fishermen paddle two canoes along the opposite shore casting near marshy grass for bass, walleye, and northern pike. PLUNK—the sound of their lures carries across the water and disappears into the boreal forest. Quetico Provincial Park is a fisherman's paradise, but we are not here to fish. We have come to get away from the noise of the city, to enjoy the wilderness, to rediscover each other.

The dusk is lavender. Loons call. John and I get into our canoe, he with his new, cheap fishing rod we bought on the drive up and I with my camera, and we go for a slow paddle around Lost Bay. In the forest we hear an animal breaking branches. I wait expecting to see a moose, but instead see a green, leafy branch skimming across water. The branch moves quickly. I wonder if a strange current is pulling it along. As the branch passes by us, I see a head emerge from the water behind it. A beaver. I've never seen a live beaver before, though I've seen a stuffed one in the Natural History museum in Chicago. This one is a fine fellow—sleek, a powerful swimmer. As he swims the water breaks into a V behind him. John and I are silent, watching him, letting the breeze blow the canoe downwind toward his mud and stick home. Suddenly he senses us, slaps his tail loud as a rifle crack, then dives. Water bubbles around us. From inside his partially submerged wattle hovel come cooing-

grunting sounds. Young beaver pups. The wind blows us down past the beaver family. We take up our paddles again, paddling away from a rock face through yellow water lilies back to camp.

Dark. In camp we pop popcorn over an open fire then sit back and listen to night sounds. The rush of the city has begun to leave my veins. I live only in the present. I am a part of nature now. Tree-like, I send roots into the ground, calm yet aware. In Sigurd Olsen's words:

This inner world has to do with the wilderness from which we came, timelessness, cosmic rhythms, and the deep feelings men have for an unchanged environment. It is oneness and communion with nature, a basic awareness of beauty, and earth wisdom which since the beginnings of man's rise from the primitive have nourished his visions and dreams.

John and I talk as the fire burns down to glowing shards.

Day 2

I awaken early and start a fire placing a full frying pan of bacon on the grill. Our outfitter has provided us with real eggs and bacon, enough to feed four people though we are only two. The smell wafts across the campsite awakening hunger pangs which we temporarily still by drinking black coffee. Looking over the map John counts the number of portages we will need to make today to get from Lost Bay to Kahshahpiwi Lake. Seven. Kahshahpiwi is our first mutual goal in months. The lake is specific, tangible. If we do reach it, I will take this to be an omen—things will work out between us. The sky portends rain. After eating breakfast, packing up, and making peanut butter and bacon sandwiches for lunch, we set off. Today our arms, necks, and shoulders are stiff. Within half an hour we come to a small bay, which is home to two bald eagles. The female is in her nest. The male perches high on a tall tree branch. We stop and gaze at them for several minutes. The male cocks his head staring back at us. Then we paddle up through a creek, which snakes through thick grasses, and come to our first portage of the day.

It has begun to drizzle. The mosquitoes are the worst I've ever encountered, worse even than those I remembered being in the Ecuadorian jungle. They attack forcing us to cover every part of our body except our hands and faces. Bites on my scalp swell into mini mountains. My hands swell to twice their normal size. Not speaking to one another, John and I persist—portaging the canoe, camera gear, fishing gear, and three fifty-pound packs. Because there are only two of us each portage requires two trips. At the end of this day I will write in my journal: Most miserable day in my life! But for now the day has just begun.

When we reach Isabella Lake, rain is pouring down. We are exhausted, grimacing. We paddle, portage, paddle, portage. In the middle of Side Lake, far from the shoreline and mosquitoes, we eat our sandwiches in the rain. Finally we reach the last lake before Kahshahpiwi. It is narrow and so small that on the map it is nameless. It is already 5:30 in the afternoon. The portage to Kahshahpiwi is over a mile long, and our outfitter has warned us that we will probably get lost. We do just that—wandering among bogs criss-crossed by moose trails, bushwhacking through heavy brush until finally we give up. Darkness is falling. We return to the canoe and

paddle back down this no name lake to a campsite not marked on the map. There is a blackened campfire ring here and a smooth sheet of rock upon which I pitch the tent. I dub this spot "Last Chance Campsite" as I'm sure it has served others like us who were unable to find the portage to Kashahpiwi. The rain lets up. John tries unsuccessfully to start a fire with wet wood, then brings out the camp stove. The heavens open again—rain, thunder, lightening. He swears and sets up a tarp, crouching beneath it and stirring a pot of something. With the rain and lightening he resembles a witch stirring a brew. But I'm too tired to wait for dinner. The mosquitoes are eating me alive and all I want is to get out of the rain. I crawl into the tent and squirm into my half wet sleeping bag. I pray that the tent will stay up all night. A mosquito bites my eyelid. In minutes my eye has swelled shut. Outside in the rain John eats an entire chicken and rice dinner for two then comes to bed. We spend fifteen minutes pulling ticks off one another then fall sound asleep, exhausted, oblivious to the thunder crashing around us.

Day 3

The morning is sunny and bright. There are no mosquitoes. I decide it is not an ill omen that we did not make it to Kashahpiwi yesterday. The weather is too nice, this lake too beautiful to care about what lies beyond. Goals only drive people insane, I realize. Better to sit back, to wait and watch, to take life as it comes. I think of the Indians who once lived here. Originally, this was the home of the Dakota-Assiniboin Sioux. They were notoriously fierce and are remembered for their raids on white settlements in their efforts to retain the central, southern, and western portions of Minnesota. They lived in teepees made from large animal hides and were principally big game hunters. Surprisingly, they were poor canoe builders, able only to build dugouts, and they stole lighter, more versatile birch bark canoes from their Indian neighbors. When the border lakes region underwent a change in forest ecology, most of the big game was forced to leave the area. The Sioux followed the big game, thus abandoning the region except for occasional hunting parties. By 1750, it was the peaceful Ojibway (Chippewa) who had come to dominate the border lakes.

The Ojibway had been forced west from their homeland by the Iroquois who had themselves been displaced westward by white settlers. With most of the big game gone, the Ojibway were far more adapted to life in this region than the Sioux. The Ojibway were master birch bark canoe builders and knew how to live off fish, berries, and wild rice. It was they who named the red berries whose stems resemble crane's necks, crane berries or cranberries. They lived scattered throughout the region in small family units and gathered together in larger groups from April to July. In winter they survived the freezing arctic winds sweeping down from the North. I realize they were probably thankful for these summer months filled with mosquitoes and thunderstorms. I am thankful too.

The sun is strong. I have eaten breakfast. Still there are no mosquitoes—it is the rain that brings them. I feel as if John and I are Ojibway, as if we have adapted to this watery landscape. We decide to backtrack and set up a base-camp. The route we planned to follow (traced in red magic marker on the map) seems too strenuous. We could do it, but I would prefer to have time to relax and melt into the scenery. I am tired of pushing and battling; wilderness need not be a boot-camp. Back we go,

partially retracing our route. Without rain the same country appears different; only the lay of the land is the same. I realize how light and weather change a place. They are nature's painters creating hue and shadow, and in doing so they affect our emotional response to the landscape. Today the portages are quick and light. We skim across the lakes. By early afternoon we find a campsite near the eagles' nest we had previously seen. The site is surrounded on three sides by water. To the south is Lost Bay; to the east, North Bay.

All afternoon we see beaver swimming. The animals captivate me. I imagine one caught in a trap, gnawing through its own leg to get free. Trapped not for food but for its fur. Trapped so men in New York and Paris could wear stylish beaver-skin hats. I've seen old black and white pictures of these men looking ridiculous wearing those top hats. It was this fashion quirk that almost decimated the beavers at one time. In the year 1746 a trader named Dobbs brought 49,000 beaver pelts out of this area alone. Around this same time the voyageurs had established trading posts and were trading with the Indians for furs, especially beaver pelts. By 1804, devastating forest fires and over-trapping had severely reduced the fur-bearing animal population of the Quetico Superior region, and the voyageurs shifted their routes farther north. Now, however, since trapping is not permitted in Quetico Provincial Park, the beaver are back.

Day 4

Another bright, cloudless day with a fine breeze. In the wilderness I feel free to ignore the childhood injunction against eating cookies for breakfast—John and I wash our oatmeal trail cookies down with coffee. I wash my hair, making sure I rinse out the suds well away from the water. Then I comb it out using the lake as a mirror. The water here in Quetico is magical. It is the source of all life, so clean that one can drink it straight from the lake untreated. My morning toilet completed, John and I pack lunch and set off in the canoe to explore. Without our heavy gear we flash across the lakes, fly over the portages. By lunchtime we have reached Shade Lake.

The city is finally past, behind us now. John fishes. I lay out a picnic: cheese, stale bread, mustard, two apples, dried apricots, then take a swim. The water is cold, not icy—cold like the quarry water I used to swim in when I was young. I float on my back looking up at the blue, empty sky—cloudless. Life is a great mystery; it has swirled me around, brought me here, and I am happy. It has been a long time since I've been happy.

The guidebook says there are two abstract thunderbirds on rocks at the end of the lake. The thunderbird was a mythical bird believed by the Indians to cause thunder and lightning. Having experienced the storm a few nights ago I understand the Indians reverence for this bird. John and I find what might be the pictographs; however, the forms could just be blotches of rust or red algae. Considering the height and placement of the pictographs, it has been surmised that the Indians painted them while standing in canoes. They finger-painted the pictographs using red ochre pigment made from powdery iron oxide found in bands of iron formation rock. The drawings are thought to have been painted within the last five hundred years.

It is late afternoon. We return to base-camp. As the sun sets, John catches a bass which he fries over the fire. After dinner I wash the dishes from a rock watching

the bald eagles in their eyrie. To the east, a white moon rises. Bull frogs croak. A partridge drums. I am not even angry at the mosquitoes anymore. A few bite me. They, too, seem to be an integral part of this night.

Day 5

Tonight will be our last night sleeping out. I say farewell to the eagle pair and to this spot which I've already come to think of as home. John and I paddle back towards civilization. Mid-afternoon, we have stopped early and set up camp on Sunday Island. We are slower now, in tune with nature and sit for hours on a rock overlooking Bayley Bay watching loons swim and dive. The sun lowers toward the horizon. A light yellow canoe flies by us, skimming across the bay like a swooping swallow. Plaintive loon calls carry across the water. Then suddenly the calls alter tone, become a raucous chattering, as if loon were set against loon. At first, John and I are frightened—what could that be? But when we realize it is the loons, we burst out laughing.

Day 6

Today is our last day. It is as beautiful as the day before, but I see it differently. Because it is our final day, I pay closer attention to what nature has to show me. The lake water seems deep with meaning. It tries to tell me something but I am too callous, still too human, to understand. It would take months in these pine forests to begin to understand what nature tries to say. I give up and lean back against a tree trunk. From out of the underbrush comes a mother mink, long and brown, walking through camp followed by three kits. They have fat, round faces and stumble as they walk. The mother sees me, turns and runs back to them. She grabs one in her mouth, runs away with it depositing it a safe distance from me, then comes back for the others repeating the process. When they are all ten feet away, she hurries them along; they vanish into the undergrowth.

The canoe has to be returned. The trip has to end. We paddle across Bayley Bay reaching customs at noon. I think it would be a good job—to be a customs man and live in a little house with a wife and child out here in the middle of nowhere. I do not want to see the city again. I do not want to spend my time in commerce and trade, toiling for dollars. Here, where we have been, a dollar would be useless. At mid-afternoon we reach the canoe outfitter. We turn in our gear and canoe, and as a reward for making it back the proprietor hands us each a cold beer. Pop—the sound of beers being opened brings me suddenly back to civilization. John and I sit on the porch drinking our beers looking out over Moose Lake. I say a silent goodbye to the lakes and woods. It's silly, I tell myself, to expect to find answers in the wilderness, but there is something—something ancient and true that I felt out there and that I am already losing sitting here on this porch. The beer is cold and good. I have another. Already I have left the wilderness.

—The End—