

No-name River

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This is any-river, a wild river you may have paddled yourself. It has the same frothing rapids and tranquil pools, brutal portages and voracious blackflies. But it is all rivers too. So it has no name.

It is, however, crowded with the ghosts of names. Millennia of leaves become skeletal and then liquid as they break apart in fast water. Herons that are as much river as wings. Muskrat and river otters, moose in quiet tributaries, lobelia and orchids, tribal camps, canoes. Sometimes their voices grow loud and sleep is impossible.

This river is north; it must be. Southern rivers are human now, as docile and stupefied as cattle. We slip our canoes into river-water with currents as alive as any running animal.

The usual band of paddlers has come on this trip, rejoining one another every year for the love of such rivers. We come in hope that the river will take us into itself. Here we become worshippers of this green land, and advocates.

We enter the river when it's calm, loving the sun on our arms and on this effusion of shifting colour. Aromatic earth and leaves brush against our skin. The road in is dustier, wider than last year, and we quench ourselves in clear water.

Canoes weighted with packs, we drift off with the current. Warm water envelops each boat, and we soon relax into the rhythm of paddling. Thick conifer woods rise up from these hills and press upon us on sharp turns. Mosses gleam emerald on half-submerged rocks. The songs of unseen birds fill us and we gradually let all sounds and images flow into and over our starved bodies.

There could be no gentler craft than this. The paddle blade nudging against riffles so that the bow shades slightly in or away from shore is like wind through feathers turning minutely for a perfect curve in space. When the blade takes you into the river, there is no longer reason to fight currents and wind. We let them lead.

The river negotiates boulders and drowned trees. We follow. The history of rock slides and uprooted pines draws us, and we

learn by reading the water and shore. This is a spillway, glacial memory of larger patterns carved by deeper rivers. Its boulders could have been carried millennia in melting ice, the sharper slices of rock are sheared off from cliffs lining the shore here. Cedars and ferns hold fast to the rock face. All will eventually merge with the river, their bones its future conversation.

Later the river softens into marshes thick with pickerelweed, arrowhead, and cattails. We feel moose in the neighbourhood and paddle quietly, intent. The bank has its own history, in hoof prints, raccoon tracks, and split shells. Animal trails push through thick shrubs everywhere. We take a detour up a small tributary barely wider than a canoe. Cross-bow rudder and draw, pole and draw again. Branches catch the bows, wildflowers crowd in among us, fragrance reminiscent of something just out of mind.

Huge moose prints press into the mud and we feel surrounded. We rest the canoes on a beaver dam and walk into thick grasses and shrubs, exposing ourselves to this private place, cautious and respectful. We are close to so strong a presence, and hope for contact, but there is a sense of resistance. We are conscious of trespass, and return to the river.

But we are ready. Deep into the trip days later, we abandon anticipation of moose and see one, water belly-high around her, feeding slowly on tender plants. We drift closer, in awe. In slow motion she lifts her lumbering weight out onto shore and fades into the bush. We are suspended, silent, happy.

The river widens and quickens here. Riffles, then rapids. We paddle into the V's and slip through, feeling the energy of fast water fill and strengthen us. The river banks pour past, green and purple, black with shade. Surges of fear are a reminder that human control is illusion.

We camp on a long rock point jutting into the wide river, wind blowing insects across and away from grateful skin. We each

nestle into a pocket or ledge of rock, alone but close, and lose ourselves in the smell and feel of a thousand lives around this bay, scuffling and swimming and tasting whatever's been washed up by the water.

As sun makes a rose blanket of the soothed river, a fox appears on the next point. Her eyes are quick, muscles alert to remote sounds. How different from the animals caged in zoos till they're stripped of all agility and deftness, all acuity and capacity to respond! She is no simple clone of all foxes. Her eyes catch every flicker of light, she chooses each action. Without warning our eyes meet and for a moment we cross over into each other's lives, there is a brief companionship. After she vanishes into the shrubs, a lingering loneliness.

The rhythm of paddling stays with us on shore, takes us out of time. A loon surfaces off the point and calls to another somewhere on a neighbouring lake. Their piercing echoes make a cathedral of the bay, and something in us falls gently in place. Trees lean against water, reflected sky brought to earth. Water slides down the loon's neck as it cranes upward calling and calling until there is nothing left but this rent in the universe, an opening into a time so ancient that loons were young and humans still embedded in the body of the land like any cub or sapling. The song carries into the lakes and firs beyond the river, meshes us with the furthest wheeling gull. There is no division between our bodies and this seamless river, water and wings. There is nothing but soaring release and a strange painful joy singing through us, making us whole again.

We relinquish any claim that our skin is the proper border of our selves. Somewhere deeper in our bones, we learn that a loon is as much a part of us as our own lungs, and if it were to be lost forever we would grieve as for the loss of power to feel spring air. The glimmering bay is deep within us, perhaps we are even part of its experience. As we gather together in a circle, one carrying kindling, another larger wood, to build the evening fire, words for what has just happened emerge, tentatively, rising with sparks from the fire. This presence that comes so near when a loon breaks apart the night, or when mist rises off the river at dawn, is something in common to loons and rivers and humans, one

among us proposes. This loon and every living being on these lakes and shores took billions of years to evolve into what they are now. There can be no human right to intervene. Against such certainty, attempts to manage wilderness seem such extraordinary arrogance, since we can never understand enough of these intricate beings or their home.

Our small group agrees there is no truly healthy land on Earth but wilderness. Most human cultures are now so out of synchrony with life, so incapable of living at peace with other life forms, that we will destroy it all unless we can re-learn humility and again hear the voices of Earth. For such distorted cultures all that is not human is a machine, each animal a stimulus/response automaton. Perhaps if more of us could meet the clear gaze of a fox we would know otherwise, and be at least partly healed.

But that would be complicating. How else could we massacre whole forest ecosystems unless we dismiss all resident wildlife as expendable ciphers? If animals are subhuman, vacuous things, they are unimportant and manipulable. Always there is a need to question further our motivations.

On a river trip such as this, convictions can emerge that all forests, loons, rivers, and foxes have lives to live as important to them as ours are to us, and as much right to live them. Our interference in their lives is an act of lunatic egoism.

One among us recalls the thoughts of a teacher, that only when we deeply experience wilderness do we fully experience the wounds we inflict on the Earth. When we finally beach our canoes at the end of our trip, we must portage past an abandoned logging camp. All trees around it are cleared, a sudden vacuum in the land. Soon we can see that the last part of the river we've paddled is edged not with deep woods but a thin strip of trees backed by huge clearcuts. We react with anguish and rage.

We know there are cutting machines that snap a tree off its roots like so much asparagus, then strip off branches like dried herbs. We have discussed before the notion that these machines are products of a male culture in love with domination and power, looking for proof of some demented mastery of nature mythed as female. A recalcitrant mother nature that after all cannot give

endlessly. This culture wills nature to be ruthless so it can say
“That is the way of the world” and justify its own continual
violence against all that is untamed.

Always, though, on a northern river trip, there are

momentary raptures to counterbalance the trauma of split trees
and mined earth. These are motivation enough for permanent
devotion to the preservation of wildness and the pursuit of further
brushes with wild nature.

