

Echinacea in yellow

Bright yellow pinwheels fly in the breeze and nod and dance to the tune of the mountain. Echinacea bedecks the fields and edges of the forest, a bright spot along with the other wild sunflowers, hawkweed, and harebells that line my way from the old bridge to the root laddered path up the hill toward my cabin. I park my car at the bridge; it's all on foot from there to the cabin. Bright yellow patches welcome me as I turn and walk the quarter mile or so to my home buried deep in the heavily shaded woods of the mountain.

The flowers and weeds of home welcome me back; they nod hello and show off their colors, waving in the wind and brushing my legs as I walk. How reassuring they are, their presence steadfast in the run up to the contrasting deep shade of the woods. Flowers live there too; but short and rare, lost in the dusky shade until hit by that bolt of sunshine. Thanks for the sunlight and the flowers, big and small, all pulled into being by the yellow sun that gives them life.

Adventuring with risk: courage beyond fear

As I approached “my” cabin for the first day of my Artist in Residence in the Porcupine Mountains Wilderness Park, the beauty of the setting overwhelmed me. Crossing an old bridge and struggling up a long root laddered hill with all my belongings was the first challenge of my day. Getting moved in and admiring my amazing green forest setting came easily; realizing how far I was from any real civilization or company didn’t sink in until the slowly gathering dusk, prolonged until nearly 11:00 in the far North Country, wrapped itself around my cabin. In the black darkness, my thoughts drifted to bears, wolves, bobcats, moose, and other creatures two footed or four. As Sophocles once famously said, “To him who is in fear, everything rustles.”

Lantern in hand, I crept fearfully to the outhouse, and, everything rustled. As quickly as possible, I raced back inside the cabin, double locking the door behind me. Fear, more like an unease or caution, helped me close windows, pull curtains, and attempt to light up my electricity-poor cabin with lanterns. As I thought about how far from any help of any kind I truly was, a couple of miles or more, fear began to grab me once again. At lights out, I dove into bed and hoped for survival until the morning.

The thrill of solitude and the art of aloneness can be intensely experienced while wandering the woods and trails. Going the entire day without seeing another person, taking in the exquisite beauty of the ancient Hemlock trees and the tiniest white flower of the Partridgeberry on the soft forest floor, and watching tumbling mountain streams take their own path is perfect solitude. But the dichotomies of fear and courage can be confusing and emotional as well as practical.

Don’t go anywhere by yourself, stay in the open, don’t talk to strangers, don’t go out after dark, don’t go far away when no one knows your destination, be careful, look in your car (and under it) before you get in. The warnings from childhood ring in one’s ears, even as your adventurous heart pulls you on and on. But without danger, there is no adventure. Without risk, there is no joy, and without fear you cannot find your courage.

In isolation the big picture loses importance, replaced by the smallest of things. Understanding the subtleties of Michigan weather, the slant of the light through the stately Maple and Hemlock trees at different times of day, seeing and recognizing native flowers like Thimbleberry, hearing the sounds and inhaling the smells of the woods become all important each day. Finding solitude in an enormous landscape teaches one to mind details, to focus on small things and faint sounds, to discover one’s relationship to the land.

Author Terry Tempest Williams writes about her mother (Diane Dixon Tempest) who spoke about solitude and said, “I have never known my full capacity for solitude,

for the gift of being alone. I can never get enough.” Williams continues on that theme when she states, “I know the solitude my mother speaks of. It is what sustains me and protects me from my mind. My fears surface in my isolation. My serenity surfaces in my solitude.” So I too came to understand this during my two weeks of solitude that revealed to me a lifelong passion, not well hidden, for being alone in nature.

In the morning, the evil vapors of fear and unease of the first day and night rose into the open air in sunlight, leaving the miasmas of concern behind. As I climbed the hill toward my cabin on the second evening, it seemed like coming home, a welcome door to an exciting adventure in the Porcupines. Happy, carefree, all alone days filled my two weeks. I conquered one difficult trail and then another, and the thrill of discovery and adventure displaced fear and showed me that the other side of fear is freedom, freedom to be yourself and be your own best company. Nelson Mandela once said, “I learned that courage was not the absence of fear, but the triumph over it.” Fear no longer bared its teeth and enforced its power; now that power was gone, replaced by freedom of spirit. I too find my solitude, my freedom, when I am alone in nature.

I was fortunate to meet a fellow traveler on the path to the Lily Pond. He was what I had longed to see, a big, slow, graying porcupine, plodding nearsightedly toward me without a hint of fear. But he was in his own space, his own world of tender leaves and shoots to eat, and the solitude to enjoy them. I stepped off the path and he continued on by me, unafraid and alone, the way he lives his life, destination unknown, but the freedom to go there at his world-weary pace. I continued on my journey, smiling and unafraid, facing the deepest wilds of the wilderness with anticipation. Onward to the Lily Pond. Go.

-Patricia P. Miller

Ferns

Forest floors decked out in green finery, different ferns, lone species, and ground level camouflage as far as you can see. This is the fern forest of the Porkies, lush and magical, rich in contrast and kind, fronds dancing in the slightest current of summer air. An amazing bursting forth of green where, short months before, the dark loam and deep pine needles were bare to sun and snow.

Now the aspects glow verdant with ferns, a myriad of heights, shapes, fronds, and growth patterns. These I believe to be Cinnamon ferns, one of the popular varieties in the park. Ferns have graced the world's woods for as long as 300 M years and although most of those species are extinct today, the modern 12,000 types of ferns are their grandchildren. Though neither flower nor seed begins a new generation, spores fall and float and become the next wave of intricate fronds to grace the woods. This forest ballerina is lovely, green, and ancient; what a tale their lives can tell.

Golden funji

Surely a gift of the gods, a token of their esteem, a golden goblet filled with the elixir of eternal youth, the liqueur of the wood fairies and brownies. Surely some magic is done by their intense golden reflection, something ethereal and mystic.

Well, actually, these are a type of fungi, Chanterelles I believe. Blooming in all their glory in one of those intensely lighted spots along the trail to Dan's Cabin, I fell under their spell the first evening and photographed them in changing lights. They waxed ever more golden over the two weeks, becoming more alluring and beautiful, especially when the sun's rays warmed their golden hearts in early afternoon.

A forest treasure, a pot of gold, a sip of forbidden pleasure, a lowly funji. But I sit with the sprites, fairies, brownies, and leprechauns: a stunning goblet and nectar of the gods.

Jack in the Pulpit 2

Even without Pastor Jack's daily sermon, the Jack in the Pulpit remains an interesting and every changing wildflower. Since the pulpit's days are surely numbered by the swelling green seedlets inside, Jack's work is done and he is on vacation until next spring. The tiny green seedlets grow rapidly, bursting out the sides of the old pulpit, growing and pushing to expand and slowly turn into brilliant royal red glossy berries that contain the actual seeds for next year's plants.

Life in the woods is never static; each day, each month, each season has brilliant successes and abject failures. But those who have eyes to see can deeply enjoy and appreciate the annual procession.

Jack in the Pulpit 1

Pastor Jack, not clad in black, was cloaked in a green curved hood with pale maroon stripes. When I was visiting the Porkies in early July, Jack, actually a small flower in a large flower, was still preaching. Large green leaves were the roof of his church and he could be hard to spot underneath them. He had yet to bolt his sermon and run off into the woods, his part of the reproductive task complete, but leaving his deserted flock to grow and flourish. Light green berries were just beginning to show in the former pulpit basement, all of them waxing red in the fall. Those seeds guarantee that Jack's song and story will be heard again next year.

A most interesting flower with a story of its own. Black Jack has spread his gospel well.

Lake Superior

The wild beauty of the Queen of the Great Lakes, Lake Superior, is known to visitors and sailors ancient and modern. The lake's immense power and legendary splendor are the subject of tales and rhymes, photos and paintings, sailor's dreams and nightmares, and scenic wonder. Nowhere on earth can rival this Sweetwater Sea in terms of pure fresh water, stunning beauty, and dark angels of death that have pulled down many hundreds of ships and their crews throughout recorded history.

"Devil or angel, I can't make up my mind" goes the old song. Along with all the superlatives one can muster, the lives and fortunes of many have been lost to her furious icy waves, her driving winds, snow, and hail, her concealed razor-sharp shoals, and her rocky shores. Frozen hard in winter, commerce grinding to a halt, she lies stiff and lurking for the sailors of summer to arrive, for boats of immense size to follow the ice breakers to the locks and beyond to far ports like Detroit, Chicago, Cleveland, and on to the ports of the east.

Shining in the summer sun, the most gentle of waves slide ashore and look innocent enough. So step right in and you will probably run back screaming at the shock of the cold. Stalk the warm sand and look for storm flung treasures, Superior's steal from the depths and the dead. Study the rock formations, the eddies and whirlpools, the endless stretch of shore and sea. How lovely. How stirring. How compelling. Superior exercises its power and pull of the surface's sunny face.

As the Witch of November thrusts her broom aloft to summon the evils of the darkened lake, the sleeping beauty becomes a wild and hopelessly untamed monster who devours 1000 foot freighters, tiny sailboats and fishing boats in its grinning grasp. Weather worse than that at sea shows the dark face of the Queen in her black gown, her azure blues of summer in storage. Beware the Queen in this garb; she is smarter and stronger than you can hope to be. Silent, near frozen, dark oblivion may await you.

Instead, show the Queen respect and admiration, and yes, "Devil or angel dear, whoever you are, I love you, I love you, I love you." -*Bobby Vee*

Lily Pond

A companion joined me as I lay basking in the sun on the dock at Lost Lake. He was basking too, enjoying the vernal embrace of sun and water lilies. The frog navigates the lake's green carpet studded with alba glory; I can only hope to see from my dry dock what nature calls the *Nymphaea*, the sprite of pond and swamp, the beauty of one single white blossom across the greenness.

The lily pad holds the frog in its steady grip but I would instead splash to the muck and dark below. How much better to live in the light from another time in eternity and to blossom and spread your pristine wings, yellow face to the sun.

I envy them both, the green frog on his green sailing ship and his perfect companion for the journey. They know only the light of forever. It is a singularity of existence not experienced by me.

Partridgeberry

Brilliant red berries catch my eye and I step over them with care so as not to ruin the picture. Red on deep green is a jolly holiday look, but this picture is woven on the summer forest floor. Northern woods with an alpine ecology can nurture the perky Partridgeberry and paint a vivid contrast in the moist cool woods. Creeping ever further across the forest floor in tight green mats, the Partridgeberry decks out the woods in a holiday mood months before December. In early spring, twin white flowers develop the gleaming berries as summer matures and birds are the chief beneficiary aside from the playful contrasting view.

Deeply colored cardinals of the Lower Michigan woods spark bright red against the snow creating a favorite winter holiday scene, but that look is here right now in the Partridgeberry. Protect the gleaming rubies for a summer feast for the birds and a visual treat for the eyes.

Spring skeleton

Union Spring bubbles up a pond of azure blue, green tinged from the mirror of its sparkling face. Clear, cool, fresh water that beckons one to sip from its surface. But there. What is the rotting skeleton that juts from the spring's edge, fouling the content and deep view of the bottom that endlessly flows with purity.

A fallen Cyprus tree rests suspended in time and place just under the crystalline surface. Its funeral drape of weeds and crusting moss stands in sharp contrast to the very idea of purity and the virginal water that surrounds it. Transfixed by the dichotomy I see before me, my mind drifts to the terrible beauty of the dead tree suspended in the clearest water in the Porcupines.

Though not its whole self as it was in life, the fallen tree continues its long march to dissolution in the very place one would expect still perfection. Its form still true but its glory diminished, it lives on in death as a thing of strange beauty, dwelling for eternity perhaps in bubbling flawless uprush.

The old bridge

Crossed two or ten times a day (always an even number), this old bridge became a marker for my adventures. It marked the end of my driving down a rutted dirt road that wound from the park highway to the bridge at water level over a branch of Union River. Iron gates were my parking space, and the act of crossing the bridge was to enter the portal to my wilderness cabin. The bridge was no longer car worthy but fine for walking or skiing. I always stopped and watched the river cascade underneath, fast moving, gliding over rocks flat and round, and singing a magic tune of freshness, cleanness, and pure joy. The old bridge began my day with a morning welcome to the park, and ended my day with a welcome home, back to aloneness away from cars, kids, fellow hikers, traffic, noise, and nearby monster Lake Superior. I entered my own world again, and found my peace.

The park wilderness holds no such bridges; a few lengths of wood perhaps, strategic stones for hopping, or the like. My bridge was the connector to my isolation and freedom; from there on, you and everything with you, went on foot.

Thimbleberry

No not maple, familiar bright green leaves aside, but swelling white mounds of the Thimbleberry growing outside my cabin window. My visit is too early in the season to see the juicy red thimbles of late summer and I can but dream of and imagine their taste. I can see them glisten in my hand, soft and warm from the sun and soon to be devoured in a tasty pastry or headed for the jam pot.

Ah timing is everything you know: I see the promise; someone else reaps the reward. With due patience, I could be the lucky one. But timing shows that things can and do occur in a different order than you might have wished.

Union Spring Hopscotch

Bubbling up 700 gallons of water a minute, the spring
reveals its pure heart and cold soul to those lucky enough
to traverse the muddy trails to its discovery.

Secret beating heart of the forest, strong pulse of
veiled strength and renewal in the harsh wildness of the Porcupine Mountains.
Azure blue rushes up from far underground, a different world of brown and black silence.
Blue gold escapes to the sun to ease the thirst of the mountains.

I cross the old mud dam, now retaining the green blast of summer that reclaimed
the Union River impoundment.

The trail narrows and turns rocky, then muddy, then puddley, then pure muck.
Hop, hop, oops, close one.

Hop, hop, hop, splat. Right in the muck. A source of grand amusement for another hiker
studying my pants and shoes, wishing me happy laundering that evening.

Stretched face down on the floating dock, I watched the gold bubble forth from the bottom.
It flows upwards, bearing the weight of the skeletons of two cypress trees,
stark and vivid in the perfect water.

Fallen giants. Death in the caress of the purest azure gold.

Every detail sharp black contrast with the clouds reflecting a slice of afternoon sun.

Pure gold, pure spring. Pure miracle.

-Patricia P. Miller

Wild iris

Tired from a long day of hiking, I rested on a log near Lost Lake, sipping water and enjoying the sun. The lost part of the lake is the invaded edge that lush vegetation has reclaimed. I walked up to soggy edges and heavy brush, struggling to find dry ground. Ready to give up and start back, I found a bit of drier land away from the marshy surface and there, to my delight, I found this wild blue iris. I had read that iris are endangered here and becoming rare, and this find of mine was so unexpected and wonderful.

Nature keeps the color of bluish purple special for certain flowers, and the iris is one of the lucky ones. This full perfect bloom was stunning with pedals in geometric proportion and unique coloration, that of blue skies and white clouds with a touch of purple sunset. This flower was the most beautiful one I found in the Porkies and I felt pretty special myself, that my persistence to “get” to the lake was rewarded in such an unanticipated but spectacular way.

Woodpecker tree

Someone has passed this way before me. Something has left its signature behind on the tree along the path. This particular something is the incredibly large and beautiful Piliated Woodpecker, this clownish Woody Woodpecker relative, who has been working this territory for a long long time.

Baseball sized holes, deep channels, tree bark in disarray below its victim, and dinner for a bird is what I see. Diminished tree vitality shows in the decayed root and bark; many a meal this victim has supplied for the woodpecker's family. Invading insects claim victory yet again, and as before, timing is everything. The tree's days are numbered but the victors nourished a young woodpecker family.

The steady sounds of the tree's coming death echo from grove to creek to the lake, drumming its last days away. Dust to dust is a sorry accompaniment to the dark, steady, deadly beat of the drum.

Yellow flower

Daily walks from Dan's Cabin to my car or up or down the mountain bike trail were adorned with flowers, ferns, and fungi. Some tiny, some multiple, some large and waving on graceful stems. The trail ecology and elevation seemed to determine the distribution and it was fascinating and fun. Nights in my darkening cabin were often spent trying to identify objects big and small. I sat hunched over in the lantern light looking through the excellent supply of guides on my bookshelf.

I believe this five part flower with sharp pointed leaves is a Cinquefoil. But since small yellow flowers were abundant in the Porkies, it may be something similar. But its sunny face greeted me every time I passed by and I finally took its photo, a brilliant spot in a dark wooded setting, and thus a bit blurred. The beauty of plants spotlighted in a ray of direct sunlight in the deep shaded woods was always a welcome surprise. Shine on magic white, yellow, and orange jewels of the woods and live your lives in wonder.