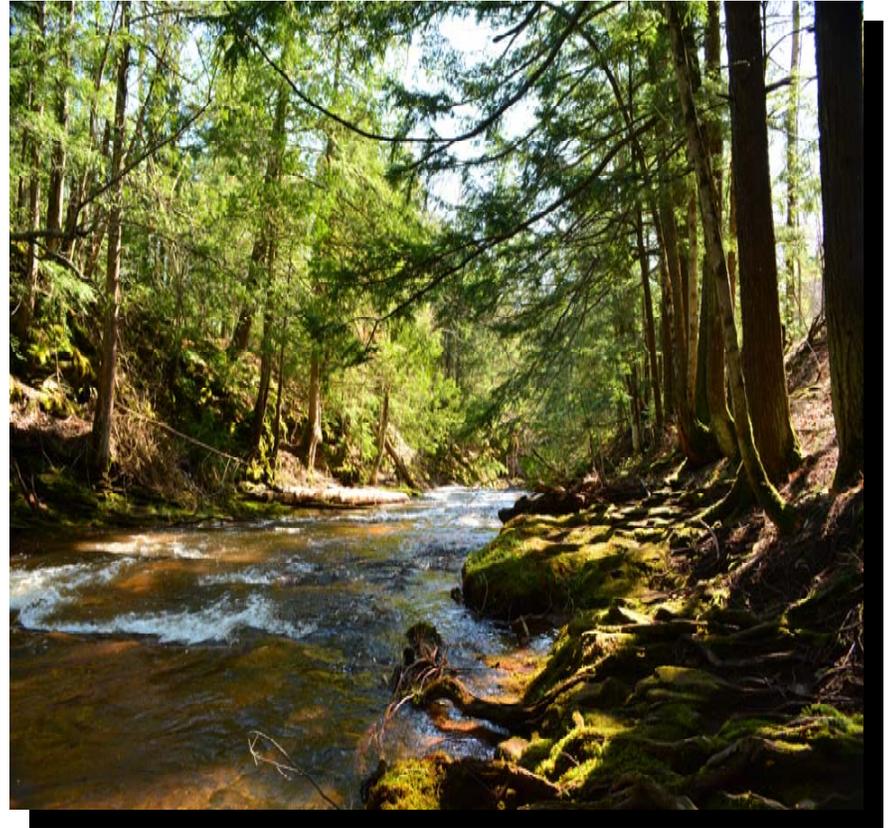


Lost in Solitude



Rosalie Sanara Petrouske
Artist-in-Residence, May 2014

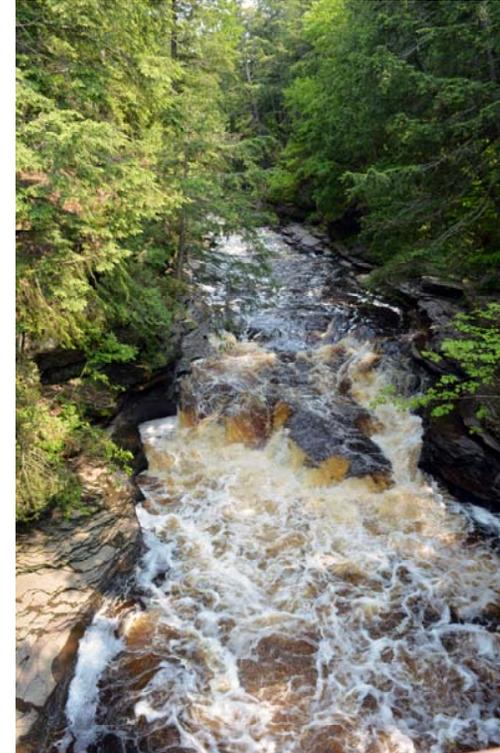


Eaglets

After hiking the Big Carp River Trail,
I saw down in the valley a bald eagle's nest.
For the past five years, this mother has returned
to her aerie to release her eggs,
only to lose them, some perhaps
fallen, others too thin-
shelled to survive the still cold nights.
Two small eaglets pop up their heads,
greedy little fellows, one stronger than
his sibling, yet not growing fast enough.
I send out a prayer to the mother
for her children to live. As mothers,
we both know how difficult it is
to protect our young.



During sessions of solitude, periods of silence, or "time retreats," we shun life's chattering distractions and simply notice what is left: ourselves."



"Little Union River" Cover Photo by Rosalie Sanara Petrouske

"Presque Isle" Inside Cover Photo
by Rosalie Sanara Petrouske

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About the Artist



Rosalie Sanara Petrouske received her M.A. in English and Writing from Northern Michigan University in Marquette, Michigan. She is an Associate Adjunct Professor in the English Department at Lansing Community College in Lansing, Michigan, where she currently teaches Freshman Composition and Creative Writing. She has

had poetry and essays published in many literary journals and anthologies including, *Passages North*, *The Seattle Review*, *Red Rock Review*, *Third Wednesday*, *American Nature Writing*, and *Lunch Ticket*. Her poem "New Year's Day" was recently featured in a broadside from the *Michigan Poet*, and she has a poetry chapbook forthcoming from Finishing Line Press. She served as Artist-in-Residence in the Porcupine Mountains in 2008 and 2014.



*The Artist-in-Residence Program at the Porcupine Mountains Wilderness State Park near Ontonagon, Michigan, is open to artists and artisans whose work can be influenced by this unique northern wilderness setting. It offers writers, composers, and all visual and performing artists the opportunity to experience the natural beauty of the "Porkies" and express it through their particular art form. For more information, visit www.porkies.org or email AIRP@porkies.org.



carefully to all the dialogues I encountered on my travels through these woods? My friend, Gemma, from the Netherlands, says conversation is relating. It's a form of breathing. While speaking is exhaling, listening is inhaling, letting the speaker in to our own consciousness.

Throughout my stay here, I have roamed marked trails and even some unmarked paths, touching the trunks of ancient trees, turning over sun warmed rocks knowing they have experienced more than I have in my small span on earth. Their voices thrum in my ears telling me about the errors that have been made throughout time; their stories are old but do not differ greatly from today's tales: love, loss, envy, greed, hate, hope. And like the monk, Thomas Merton, I have pondered some on the state of humankind, on what it takes to achieve bliss and peace within oneself where inner solitude resides, and how to tap that resource. I, too, heeded the rhythms of the rain and lived in the moment.

There is no longer any tapping on the roof; the rain has stopped. I open the door and step out on the porch to breathe in the clean scent of wet pine needles, moist moss, and what remains of last autumn's dried leaves mulching to make way for new growth.



Rain

*"Then stirs the feeling infinite, so felt in solitude,
where we are least alone."*

— Lord Byron

Soon after I arrive at Dan's cabin, the sky clouds over and it begins to rain, a steady chatter on the roof like old friends gabbing. Hemlock needles drip, wet and green, in these spring woods, and the only sounds are the whoosh of the flame in the propane lanterns and the drum of rain overhead. I remember the monk Thomas Merton's essay, "The Rain and the Rhinoceros." As Merton said while sitting in a cabin like mine, listening to the rain and watching the night grow darker, "Nobody started it; nobody is going to stop it. It will talk as long as it wants this rain. As long as it talks, I am going to listen."

I have come to read, to write, and to experience solitude. I am almost certain I may be the only human alone in this wilderness tonight, except, perhaps a solitary hiker setting up his camp somewhere. What will my time here tell me? It has been six years since I last visited, sat at the pine wood table looking out the window at early green shoots and the small curls of fiddlehead ferns just beginning to push up.

At home, I often find it difficult to sit still for very long; I need to be walking talking, or writing at the computer. There is no electricity, no running water, no distractions here, except for the chill in the room. Cell phone service is also unreliable, especially at night. I go out to the small porch, split some logs and light a fire in the pot-bellied stove. They are untimed motions; I conduct them without rushing, for I have nowhere else to be.

What is the rain telling me tonight? It whispers about quiet and asks me if I fear being alone. It has grown considerably darker outside the window; in the glass the sparks of flame from the lanterns flickering in the background of the cabin's interior illuminate a bed in the corner, dresser, bookcase, and myself at the table.

One of my friends tells me she fears being alone because she fears her thoughts, what truths she will find lurking in the recesses of her brain. Another friend says her mind is seldom quiet enough for her to feel solitude. She thinks solitude invites fear in. "Sometimes," she says, "I imagine myself in a sunken ship or a wrecked airplane." I, too, have had similar frights, often refusing to sleep without the comfort of a small lamp on my bedside table.

Because of the rain, there will be no moon or stars when I blow out the lanterns later, not even a brighter outline to distinguish the difference between sky and treetops. I don't, however, have any fears tonight. The door is bolted and the room is safe and filled with warmth. I'm tired from trekking my supplies up the trail, but it's a good tired. The bed has been made, a simple supper prepared and consumed, and now my journal patiently waits for me to pick up my pen and turn its pages. If I feel lonely, I have the companionship of the rain. I will eventually fall asleep in the dark, listening to it converse above my head.



Full Circle

It rains again on my last night in the mountains; a slow, steady downpour tapping on the roof of this quaint timber frame dwelling lovingly built by stewards of the environment. I am glad the builders kept its integrity, using only local materials, such as the red pine logs found along Superior's shore. During my stay here, I have come to think of Dan's Cabin as my own cabin of solitude. Earlier, hiking up the trail in my blue rain slicker, only a few drops of water penetrated the thick tree cover and dampened my face. Ferns fanned out, nearly reaching to my knees, all new growth a promise of the forthcoming summer. I thought about the man this residence was built to honor, Dan Urbanski, a renowned nature photographer who walked these trails several years ago. Sometimes, I have felt his gentle spirit lingering nearby, protecting the artists who come to write, paint, sculpt, weave, or follow in his footsteps and document this wilderness from behind a camera lens.

At the table inside, I light only my candle lantern, wanting to preserve the quiet dimness and soft shadows slanting along the cedar framed walls. A square of brightness filtering through the window set high in the roof's peak tells me the rain might be letting up, but I don't mind its soft pattering over my head and on the foliage outside, and I listen to its muted voice as I did on my arrival. I didn't expect to be here again in this lifetime, knowing that such an opportunity is a gift that rarely happens twice. I brought several books to read, but have only finished one. I have hiked to see a bald eagle's nest, up to Cloud Peak, and along the Lake Superior Trail. I've spent more time in the cabin with a fire going, watching the light on leaves shift and change hues in morning sunglow and evening shade. I have awakened frightened in the penetrating darkness and silence, only to grope for my little headlamp; then go back to sleep, reassured. Opening the window, I let in the whisper of the Little Union River's waterfalls, and the muted call of some night bird seeking shelter from the precipitation. What is the rain telling me, I wonder? Have I given my whole being to just being here, to learning the shape and curve of this land, water, and trees? Being a good listener takes concentration and focus. Sometimes we are too conscious of ourselves to give our full attention to who is speaking. Have I truly listened

of an hour and a half now nears two and a half. A soft swishing filters through the roaring in my ears. *Is that water?* I think. With a final burst of energy, I shove dried, broken branches away from my face and step out onto the pavement of M-107. The sound I thought was water is actually the tires of a passing car. Yanking twigs and crumbled leaves from my hair, I swipe at my forehead that itches furiously, and my palm comes away smeared with a streak of blood from a mosquito bite. In the distance, I hear a faint voice and realize it is Liz yelling my name. Walking toward the sound, I found the curved shoulder, and there she is, hurrying toward me. "What happened?" She calls out. "Are you okay? I was just about to go for help."

Back at the cabin, hot soup made out of a hodge-podge of vegetables: kale, sweet potatoes, onion, tomatoes, chicken broth, and white beans restores my equilibrium. The last few hours had a sobering effect, and I wonder if getting lost makes us appreciate the small moments we often take for granted? Does it show us we need to follow less and think for ourselves more? Sometimes, when we travel with others in life, we lose our own sense of direction. My rusty compass no longer points north, and I rely on someone else to take control and get me to my destination. My father used to say getting lost was an adventure. Perhaps, I think, we all need to get lost at least once to prove to ourselves we can be found, or eventually find our own way.



Astonishment

*"Instructions for living a life
Pay attention
Be astonished
Tell me about it"*

—Mary Oliver

The second morning of my stay in the mountains, I drive down the South Boundary road toward the lake. When I crest the hill, I see the bright blue of Union Bay that welcomed me yesterday now covered in ice floes. It looks as if a blizzard has blown in overnight. I park and walk down to the beach, staring out at the mounds, crevices, and sparkling crystals glittering in the sun. A surreal feeling surrounds me as I jog along the deserted beach. Ghostly tendrils of mist rise up from the icy blocks. Beneath the surface, a chinking, clicking sound as the floes away with the current makes me feel like some Arctic creature might rise up at any second poking its head from the freezing water. If it does, I hope it's a friendly beast. The chilly appearance of the landscape does not deter my joy as I wander along the shoreline.

Contemplating the expanse of white as far as I can see, I realize that even in my urban landscape in the Lower Peninsula where I live, I rarely experience nature totally. When I hike along the Grand River at Fitzgerald Park, I usually notice faint reverberations of cars rushing by on the road, or the distant laughter of some father and his son fishing down by the dam, even dogs barking as they chase through the woods in abandonment—all the comforting resonance of a social life far removed from the more remote nuances of this area where I am the only one so far to press my footprints into the sand. Although M107 passes by the beach area, very few cars travel it this early in spring.

Even though the bay is covered in ice, it is almost balmy out. I know by the end of my stay only a few larger chunks of the flotsam will remain. In my blue Columbia jacket and a long sleeve shirt, I am comfortable enough to find a rock where I sit reading a book of Mary Oliver's poems. As I read, water sloshes beneath the ice, grating and shifting as the chunks grind against each other, beginning the process of

of melting. Shading my eyes, I look out as sun glints off crystals throwing back sparkling beams.

One morning a few days later, I arrive to find splinters of ice washed ashore. Scattered over the beach, they are flawless gemstones, translucent as quartz—I gather small handfuls, turning them over in my palms to admire their symmetry, delicate spears and conical formations that catch and spray rays of light. Wondrous, I think, as I breathe in great gulps of cool morning air and continue wandering through the remarkable landscape before me.



“Ice” by Rosalie Sanara Petrouske



off the myriad thoughts swirling through my head like a leaf caught in a rushing river. My leg muscles ache a little from the upward trek, but in a good way. It feels healthy to test my body and my limits, to reach for small accomplishments each day, to know my time is well spent.

The low rumble of hunger finally causes us to vacate our spots and begin the journey back toward lunch at Dan’s Cabin. The return hike goes more quickly; the three miles in seemed much longer. Stopping to photograph a branch of serviceberries, I lose sight of Liz, who hurries ahead. For a while, as I climb higher or round a turn, I catch a glimpse of her, but when I reach a tall ridge and no longer see the footpath, I head down into a thickly wooded area where birch, aspen, and balsam grow profusely. Expecting to see her, yet no Liz greets my view; I quicken my pace, calling her name. Pausing to listen, I hear only the creak of branches and chatter of birds in the tree-tops above me. Soon, I realize the trail has tapered off into denser outgrowth. Stopping, I survey my surroundings and think, *I’m lost*. “Liz. Liz!” My voice grows louder and louder, but there is no answer.

Visualizing the silver safety whistle on its long black cord, I see it tucked into the zippered pocket of the backpack slung over my friend’s shoulders. I want to pound the trunk of a tree in frustration, but know it will only scrape my knuckles. Scanning the woods, which seem to grow darker as the sun moves toward mid-afternoon, I cannot pick out any blue triangles indicating a marked trail. Thoughts whirl frantically through my head and I feel my heart begin racing, although I know the lake is behind me and in front up the hillside lies M-107. In that moment, I realize this is not the kind of solitude I wanted. More annoyed for following Liz, rather than paying closer attention to the trail, I begin the awkward scramble upward skirting over fallen logs, patchy mud-filled bogs, often bypassing creeks and gullies filed with spring run-off. Fortunately, I use my walking pole for balance, and as a hook to pull myself up steep slopes. I’ve forgotten about hunger as I continue to push onward, pausing only to listen for any traffic sounds. The chirruping and trilling of songbirds seem to mock me as they warble merrily, oblivious to my predicament. Our hike

Exploring

"Getting lost is just another way of saying 'going exploring'"
—Justina Chen, *North of Beautiful*

On May 27, my friend Liz from downstate came to spend two nights with me. Although she interrupts my solitude, the company and conversation is welcome, and I find my voice again. I attune happily to casual chatter and laughter. On Tuesday afternoon, we head out to hike the Lake Superior trail. At sixteen total miles this is the longest trail in the park, but we only plan to hike in about three miles, then turn around and head back in time for lunch. It is a sunny day, not too cold or too warm. We wear light jackets and make sure we are each supplied with water bottles. Liz takes my pack with the first aid supplies and safety whistle, so I have only my camera equipment as I follow Liz. For the first five minutes, we hike through an area of old growth hemlocks before emerging into a mixed hardwood forest. After another five minutes, we climb over a ridge of conglomerate bedrock, and then walk steadily along a high, rocky ledge skirting the lake.

Occasionally, we pause to stare out at the clear water where a few ice floes continue melting. At the edge of the shore, branches abloom with serviceberries waver slightly in the breeze. In muddy areas of the route, we encounter a few marsh marigolds scattered in clumps. Eventually, we veer off toward the Buckshot Cabin near the end of our destination, deciding not to continue on to Lone Rock, where on a clear day the Apostle Islands are visible across the lake to the northwest. Buckshot is unoccupied, so we peer in windows and use the outhouse before taking a break to sit on a rocky outcrop staring out at the breakers foaming to shore. With the sun warming my shoulders, a sense of peace surrounds me. I close my eyes and listen to the slosh of water gurgling in crevices, and the faint cry of gulls carried away by the wind. My mind empties of any awareness, all but my senses, and soon I grow sleepy, arms clasped around my knees, eyes squeezed shut against the bright daylight. This kind of meditation is good for the soul; it is what I am trying to find: the ability to release my worries and to turn

River Symphony

About thirty feet from the cabin's back door, the Little Union River rushes over a small waterfall and continues along its rocky bed, traveling to Superior, the big lake. Headed down to the river this afternoon, I finally understood what Marianne Robinson meant when she wrote about being a child walking into the woods and feeling the solitude around her build like electricity, then pass through her body with a prickly jolt. Towering hemlocks, moss-covered rocks, and lichen growing up the sides of fallen trees surrounds me. A few birds twitter in the branches, but they are so high up their song reaches my ears like the tinkling of far-away piano keys.

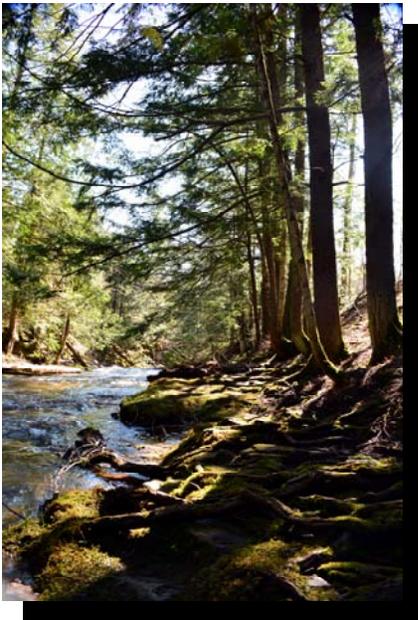
Sitting on a rock in a patch of sunlight, I feel as if I could come back to this exact spot again and again, and find it unmarked by seasons or years playing the same whispery notes in its leaves. Of course, I know this is not true. The forest is always in renewal, as old growth trees topple over or die out and younger saplings take their place in the ecosystem. Waterfalls and river paths change as well, some overflowing during floods or spring runoffs, while others dry to mere trickles for lack of rain.

However, the remnants of volcanic eruptions a billion years ago, and the much later glacial ice traveling across the mountains are still evident today in the lake area. The basalt along Superior's shores shows conglomerates of rock formations from lava flows, and its grooves score the earth where the ice sheets retreated. Its rock still crunches under my feet when I walk. Consequently, though the forest is ever evolving, it remains relatively unchanged to the eye. Compared to the short span of human lives, these wooded paths, trails and escarpment seem static; in memory nearly the same as a last visit or even preceding ones.

The excursion I am on today is no different than previous people's journeys. Once moccasin clad feet whispered down this forest path, perhaps another woman sat in this same place, on this exact rock pausing from her gathering to rest. Possibly, she,

desire to connect with a greater entity and found the same solace that I find in this quiet moment, listening to the forest perform its tunes. Placing my hand against the immense bark of an Eastern Hemlock, I feel that jolt of awareness, intimacy and magic thrum through my palm as I look up at its emerald crown silhouetted against the sky.

Feeling small and insignificant, I pull off my hiking boots and socks, then wade into the shallow water being careful not to step on a sharp stone. There's an irregular rhythm to the water sliding over my ankles, and to the movement of the branches above me. It is non-metrical, organic. The wind in the hemlocks and the bubble of the rapids join in a unique symphony, each instrument, old and new, somehow in perfect harmony of time and moment.



“River Roots” by Rosalie Sanara Petrouske



Although their camaraderie is unwanted,
I feel less alone, tuck my head beneath the blanket
and return to sleep, not knowing if I will wake again
before morning



“Wild Rose” by Rosalie Sanara Petrouske

I heard a Fly buzz – when I died –
The Stillness in the Room
Was like the Stillness I the Air –

My English Professor, Rowena Jones,
said once, “Its strange to think how fearful
Emily was of dying, but now she’s gone,
just like all of us will someday no longer be here”
Would I want my last sound heard on Earth
to be a pesky mosquito or fly? I think not.
The mosquito’s feet are brushing
my chin – I slap again; scales, bits of antennae, forelegs
and blood smear my palm.

IV.

A log falling in the woodstove startles me,
or maybe it’s a bat trying to come down the chimney,
believing he has found a cave to hide in,
but ending up with scorched wings, a near miss
at being burned alive.
I get up to check, add more wood to the fire,
find nothing but embers and ash.

V.

At 3:00 a.m., awakened by a faint rustle,
I feel something brush past my head.
Wrapped mummy-like in the blanket,
I struggle from the covers to turn on my headlamp
and shine it over the ceiling and floors.
When I illuminate the knotty pine wall,
I see an army of carpenter ants marching by,
their black bodies elongated in the shadow
from my light making them appear twice their size.
Crawling out of a crack in the woodwork
to forage for food, they travel single file
into the kitchen where I have left in the trash
potato peelings from last evening’s supper.

Night Conversations

Night in the mountains is restful, a winding down of
the day, a time to reflect on what has passed, what I have en-
countered on a long hike through one of the 87 miles of trails in
this 60,000 acres of wilderness. Today I hiked the Escarpment
trail and only encountered one other person. We smiled, nod-
ded to each other and continued on. Henry David Thoreau
once wrote, “I never found a companion that was companion-
able as solitude.” I, too, have discovered I can pass the day
without speaking to anyone when I am surrounded by water,
wind, and the protective branches of hundred-year old trees
providing shade and cover from the rain. The baby squirrel that
lives under the hemlock in the hillock behind the cabin greets
me when I climb up the path every evening. Tonight I pause to
ask him where his mother is, and he cocks his head to one side
as if he understands me before scampering away. Although, I
never make it a habit to feed the wildlife, I leave a few nuts
from my cache as a little treat for his friendly overtures.

Speaking aloud to the trees, the river, or even my small
companion makes me realize how guttural my voice sounds
after not having spoken for nearly a day. My words creak out,
rusty and crackling – at first a small squeak, then almost a
screech. I clear my throat and begin again, thinking how odd it
is that our day-to-day conversations modulate our voices, but
solitude “un-tunes” them for the human ear.

Later after supper, I sit watching through a window as
the sun lowers behind the hemlock’s lacy branches. The nu-
ances of shadow and illumination are fragile here – the deep
rich greens of spring, the light sometimes misty and mysteri-
ous,
almost weightless, touching lichen and mosses, and the radi-
ance of burgeoning leaves of trout lilies. Something worshipful
about this enormous beauty makes me want to life my palms
together in a prayer of gratitude. Flipping open my notebook, I
try to capture what I see in a poem:

As day lengthens,
a westerly sun slants
through pinnacles
of towering hemlocks,
while lower trunks remain
shadowed peaks
of feathery greenery,
tipped with God-light.

Night takes its time to arrive. At first, the sun moves to the west, and the trees around the cabin cast long shadows, slowly blocking out the light. Birds, more numerous than in the mornings, chirrup somewhere unseen in the highest branches. They disturb the quiet with their cawing and twittering. Nestled in the hemlocks, the cabin grows dim quickly. The sky darkens to a deeper blue, then grey, with an occasional pink tint in the west, barely visible in the distance. The tall trees become black silhouettes against the silvery-blue and shapes blur and grow indistinguishable.

I have here to seek silence and to write, but as I have found in the past, nature is never entirely voiceless. It is the clamor of human intonations that are absent. The babble of cultural noise, worries, constant demands for attention, deadlines, and the blare of technology disappear in the backcountry. Alone, I can learn to be myself, to be my own company, to hear my own thoughts, my breath going in and out, and the beating of my heart – to engage my own aliveness.

In the cabin, the puffing of the propane lamps drowns outside noises. Their hiss creates a steady roar in my eardrums as the flame pops and crackles. It reminds me of the rumble and grumble of Lake Superior on a stormy night as breakers slap the shoreline.

Yet, once extinguished, even in the complete dark if the window is left slightly ajar, there is never a total absence of sound. When I strain my ears to listen – there is always the call of some nighthawk, or the wail of an animal snatched up for dinner in the talons of an owl. Down by the creek, the waterfall speaks as it tumbles over the pebbles and rocks polishing them like an expert lapidarist.

Midnight at the Cabin

*"No one ever told me that grief felt so like fear."
– C.S. Lewis*

I.

Close to midnight at the cabin, I think about my friend.
I have learned he is near death from a stroke.
When I turn out the propane lanterns,
his brilliant words hover around me on pinpoints of light.

Immersed in silence now that the whooshing and popping
of the lamps have ceased, their comforting flame extinguished.
I try to adjust my eyes, to find through the window
some subtle illumination in the sky that seemed so black tonight.
'Pitch-black,' my grandmother would say.

II.

My heart unsettles – I worry It might thump too loudly,
dislike when I feel its restless flutter in my check,
imagine it might speed erratically to a sudden stop
overburdened with sorrow for everything lost.
Although, I'm not usually fearful alone in this wilderness,
secure in the knowledge I can care for myself;
tonight the darkness and silence weighs on my chest,
makes my breath come in short, small gasps,
as disquieting thoughts of past regrets
and mistakes steal in.

III.

Opening a window next to the bed,
I hear the babble of water drift across
the dark; the buzz of an annoying mosquito
hovers near my right ear.
Slapping and missing, I am reminded
of Emily Dickinson's fly –

The *Common Book of Prayer*, my lips moving but not speaking the words aloud:

O Lord, support me all the day long,
Until the shadows lengthen and the evening comes,
And the busy world lies hushed,
And the fever of life is over,
And our work is done.
Then in thy mercy grant me a safe lodging,
And a holy rest,
And peace at the last.



Symphony (a 100-word poem)

Sun, slanting through the cabin window
falls like a blanket over my shoulders,
where I lie on the bed,
doors open to the splash of rapids skipping over rocks,
sweeping on to greater waters.

Lichen covers trunks of ancient hemlocks,
guardians of this little house in the woods.
Budding trout lilies shoot up overnight,
clusters of green gather everywhere,
defying the ice still floating on the lake.

For an hour, I listen to the wilderness symphony,
deep throated bassoons, mellow woodwinds,
bright violas, and sweet violins,
as mossy fingers strum the wind
in this ray of light, this quiet hour.



“Superior Sunset” by Rosalie Sanara Petrouske

Solitude

The last vestiges of sunlight fall across the wooden table top as dusk comes to the hemlock woods. I sit, looking out at the light touching the undersides of leaves, enjoying the voice of a lone bird trilling high in the tree top. How merry he sounds singing rapturously before the darkness silences him!

I wonder about the impact this experience in solitude will have on me. *What constitutes solitude?* I think. *Is it going off to a little cabin in the woods far away from responsibility? Is it just having some gentle moments to be alone without interruptions or demands? Or is it about alienation from all human connection?*

One part of solitude I acknowledge is hearing my own thoughts echo through the cabin after I extinguish the propane lanterns. Even though sometimes those thoughts are frightening, I hear my own voice more distinctly. Of course, when I am alone, it is easy to dwell on past hurts and mistakes, or to think about my own mortality. And sometimes when I can escape my noisy mind, it is peaceful to have no thoughts at all, to just be in this place without any expectations, judgments, or meanings, and let each day unfold slowly revealing itself as the hours pass.

Doris Grumbach, former literary editor for *The New Republic*, lived in her coastal Maine home one winter for fifty days, rarely speaking to anyone. She writes in her memoir about her experiment in embracing solitude:

In this way, living alone in quiet, with no vocal contributions from others, no sounds (except music) from beyond my own ear, I was apt to hear news of an inner terrain, an endolithic self, resembling the condition of lichens embedded in rock.

Her quote suggests that in the absence of distractions people begin to take note of hidden aspects of their own minds, and time offered her too many possibilities for what she might do, so that she could not concentrate on one thing for very long. Like Grumbach, here in this cabin, I have also found it difficult to focus. I brought several books with me and find myself flipping from one chapter to another, putting that book down and then starting a different one, or stopping to write a few words, and then going back to the first book I had picked up, and so on.

Prayers in the Wilderness

On Friday, May 23, I received some sobering news from home. My dear friend, Jim Wiljanen, suffered a stroke last night. I am not sure how he is doing — the email from another friend said he is resting comfortably. My prayers go out to him and his wife. This comes as a shock. Last August Jim recovered well from a triple bypass surgery and was quickly back to being the droll, yet serious, kind-hearted man I know well. He is very like the character, Spooner, in the novel he is writing. In his personal essays, however, Jim often contemplates his own death. He is, I suppose, nearing the age in his late sixties at which people begin to think about their eventual ending, and major surgery can certainly bring about such rumination. Recently, he told me he was glad to have live through this past year, one of the coldest and snowiest in Lower Michigan in several decades.

Giving me a slight grin, he said, “I’m happy to have experienced the Polar Vortex.”

Outside the solitude of Dan’s Cabin, gold tips the trees, and a single songbird carols sweetly. At the table inside, I fold my hands beneath my chin and pray for my friend, and for guidance to be strong. Beyond the porch where the Adirondack chair waits for me to sit, the lively rapid tumbles by; its babble and burble my steady companion through day or night. All I have to do is open a door or window to hear it speak. Additional trills high in the branches of an Eastern hemlock have joined my one lone bird. The Seneca and Micmac (a tribe from the Northeaster woodlands of Canada), attribute those trees with spiritual powers and they play a role in their native lore. Those stately sentinels often live to be 400-500 years old, dwarfing human life. Although later tonight, it will rain, I will not think of spring; instead, I imagine snow and how the hemlock’s flexible branches and feathery needles allow snow to sit, their branches to bend and bow but not break. I imagine some woodland creature or lost human taking shelter beneath those welcoming arms.

As the sun dips lower, it sends more radiant golden rays to touch the moss, filtering through the conifer canopy. I recite from

of trail where I may not encounter another person for several miles. These considerations caution me to look for roots, so I don't trip over them, or use my walking pole to keep my balance when maneuvering along a rocky ledge. Therefore, it is always nice to meet another hiker, and exchange a friendly greeting before continuing on, turning to watch as they disappear around the next bend in the trail. Perhaps, I think, it isn't the unknown visitor, human or otherwise, that produces my fears, but the recognition of my limits and vulnerabilities that can only be strengthened by others.



"Lake Art" by Rosalie Sanara Petrouske

It's not the mental exercise that is unsatisfying, or the need for diversions; it is simply because I am not used to having so much uninterrupted time, and like a giddy child, I cannot decide what "toy" to play with first. What to do next or how to order the importance of each task seems confusing. This lack of boundaries makes it more difficult to accomplish the goals I've set for myself.

A colleague who lived in Indonesia, as a child, tells me that the word *Sepi*, though it means quiet, in Indonesian has a much more negative connotation than it has in our English version. It also means lonely and deserted; perhaps, because of the more group oriented culture, having time to oneself is not valued as much as it is in America. She said, "While I was happy to have time to myself or solitude, people felt pity for me if they saw me alone."

A friend and former writing colleague, Mary, explains why she likes to walk by herself. "I want to move at my own pace, get lost in my thoughts and what's around me. Solitude is within and without." Both here in the mountains and back home, I often mirror Mary's actions. If I cannot write or read, or I am not sure what direction to take a particular poem or essay, I go for long walks letting possible ideas seep into my mind. Often I have returned from these excursions to sit down and write a poem in its entirety. I tried out different versions in my head as I walked before actually putting the words on paper. The important thing I have discovered about walks is how the rhythm of one-two coordinates with breathing and the beating of the heart. That recalibration regulates thinking, too, which is why it's always so clarifying to walk.

Another friend once expressed to me the limitations of solitude, suggesting that we learn about ourselves mostly in relationships. He says in relating to another person we must make an effort to know what it is, exactly, we want to say and also how it will be received. In the reaction of the other person, we see our own strengths and weaknesses. Consequently, he doesn't think full self-knowledge is possible in isolation, since isolation leaves us unchallenged; however, he says, "there is a great deal of fear relating to others. Fear of judgment, mostly. Yet, being alone can be exhilarating, a nervous, persistent fear."

As much as I enjoy being alone, I can relate to this fear. When I think about total aloneness, since I come from a small family consisting only of my daughter and one sister, not having

anyone connected to my blood and bone disquiets me; the missing bond to someone dear that casual acquaintances cannot replace. In the encroaching darkness, I will myself not to dwell in this black well of future dreads, but to focus on the ways solitude encourages me to feel strong and capable of caring for myself.

Perhaps, it is about finding balance. Mary, explains, "Too much solitude feels alienating, too little smothering. Solitude makes us work on our connections to ourselves. Sometimes I am fearful of being alone; other times it's my preferred state." It is the singleness of self-discovery that attracts me, the kind of solitude I choose; nevertheless, after having spent two weeks in the cabin, I will be ready to return to civilization, a hot shower, to the call of friends and family, and the lively sounds of traffic whirring by. I know though once I leave these woods, I will long for the stillness and quietude of this solitary dwelling, the simplicity of heating oatmeal over a gas flame, pumping water, and hiking for miles with nothing ahead but the promise of another waterfall. Inside the room, it has now grown too dim to see very well. Outside, the solo bird's song has subsided. Reluctantly, I climb up on the stool so I can reach and light the propane lanterns, being careful not to damage the fragile mantles as the flame catches and curls up in a blue arc. Returning to the table, I open my journal and pick up my pen.



Fears

"The only thing we have to fear is fear itself."

— Franklin D. Roosevelt

Although I know how to be safe in a remote area, this journey is not without a sense of danger. Certainly, wolves, coyotes, black bears, red foxes, and lynx inhabit this area, yet I have rarely encountered any, and then only from a distance. Still, I have heard the wolf howl late at night, a lonely echoing through the dark, as if he were crying out simply to hear his own voice. More importantly, even though I enjoy being responsible for my personal needs and making decisions that will affect no one else, I am sometimes afraid — not particularly of the coyotes, wolves or black bears, but more that some human presence might make its way to the glow of my small light waver in the darkness, and I will have to decide if those intruders are friends or foes. Often, I laugh at this foolishness. I have been here several nights, and no one but a raccoon or porcupine looking to share my supper has ever come to the sturdy wooden door. Nonetheless, the fear persists.

Late at night when I am reading, warmed by a fire in the pot-bellied stove, the screeching of some small mammal, a shrew or vole caught in the beak of a barred owl, sends chills up my spine. While I know I am safe inside, with my plaid blanket tucked over my knees, it is during times like these when I think having a companion would be comforting. Most of my trepidations are often self-induced by my overactive imagination, such as when I'm hurrying up the trail at nightfall and hear a twig crackle. Cautiously, I look over my shoulder almost certain that I'm being followed. Once, to my chagrin, I discovered it was merely a large toad hopping through the underbrush and another time, in the middle of the day, a pileated woodpecker fetching his lunch from an ant-infested log.

I would not, however, be honest if I did not say that when I am far away from human interaction, I sometimes worry about falling or needing someone, and not being able to get help. This is especially true when I navigate long expanses of

90 million. Enduring all that time, they must be doing something right.

As evening falls, the back of my right arm aches where I dislodged one of the unfriendly insects with a pair of tweezers. There is a bruise and the patch of skin above my elbow is puffy. I smear on some medicated ointment, and then take my cup of herbal coffee out to the porch where I sit on the Adirondack chair and watch dusk gently overtake the woods. Soon another pesky creature begins buzzing around my head—the mosquito. Local folk recently told me the unusually large bumper crop this year is due to the long and snowy winter. I recently read a news article by Ned Walker, a Michigan State University entomologist who wrote, “They’re out in great numbers and that’s because. . . lots of spring snow melt and spring rains have kept these woodland pools and flood plain areas wet and producing the mosquitoes.” I am also certain the sudden warm temperatures experienced over the Memorial Day weekend added to their population explosion.

At least the spider populace is small and I have not seen any in the cabin yet, although I am sure they have been spinning their webs high in the rafters while I am sleeping and hopefully catching the pesky mosquitoes I think of Issa’s haiku:

Don’t worry, spiders,
I keep house
casually.



Cloud Peak

*“O Solitude! If I must with thee dwell,
Let it not be among the jumbled heap
Of murky buildings: climb with me the steep, –
Nature’s observatory – whence the dell,
In flowery slopes, its rivers’ crystal swell. . . .”*

– John Keats

In an antique store in Lower Michigan, I found a 1952 postcard of Lake of the Clouds. It shows a red-shirted man wearing khakis carrying a canteen on his belt, and a woman dressed in brown cords and a forest green anorak. Both stand on the Escarpment looking down at the clear water and miles of virgin timber. In the photo, the ribbon of the Carp River winds on the left about 300 feet below. The landscape is brilliantly green, and a hyacinth blue sky has streamers of cirrus clouds sailing across its surface. Today, most people observe the panorama from the opposite end where platforms and boardwalks make it easier for those of all ages and stages of mobility to enjoy the scenery. In the 1950s, manmade structures built for our pleasure and protection didn’t mark the area. Instead, the vista stretched, immense and breath-taking, and the couple stood at its very edge. As the back of the card proclaims, “The view of untouched wilderness is magnificent.”

Today, I hike up to Cloud Peak with park naturalist, Bob Wilds, as my guide to try to find the exact location where the couple stood. Rather than following the marked path, Ranger Wilds and I climb around the side of the mountain on our secondary quest to find a rare ladyslipper, the Ramshead; unfortunately, we cannot find the unique specimen, yet to our delight, we soon discover the sloping hillside is covered with trillium and the speckled leaves of nearly in-bloom blue bead lilies.

When we reach the top, I step out and beneath me unfolds Lake of the Clouds. The thought of the years that have passed since my postcard pair perused this scenery astonishes me—sixty-one years ago. The breeze ruffles my hair and ripples across the lake’s bright blue surface. Detecting another faint undulation in the water, I see a tiny swimmer venturing out from the shore. From this point, the terrain appears barren

as the May buds of hardwoods are difficult to perceive and the starkness of bare branches prevails dotted with the various greenish-blue hues of cedars, spruce and white pine. Since memorial day, the weather has turned unusually hot; mosquitoes and ticks have appeared in large numbers and no doubt the leaves will soon open in this warmth.

Mr. Wilds snaps a photo of me as I stand, foot braced against the glacially smoothed basalt trying to mimic the same pose of my postcard duo. Wilds is a restful companion. He tells me he often comes up here to be alone. For me, it's nice to have someone to speak with after a week of little human contact, although I am not ready yet to carry on an in-depth dialogue. We allow lengthy silences to fall between us as we sit sipping from our water bottles looking out. We agree we much prefer this overlook rather than the other side where most visitors go.

Tipping back my bottle after taking another long drink, I contemplate the roads less traveled and the man and woman on the postcard who traveled one. What would they think of the changes technology has wrought in our lives today? Or the challenges our environment is experiencing, such as the melting of the polar ice caps, pollution of our air and lakes, acid rain, oil spills—my list goes on. They probably believed the verdant earth before them would remain untouched for many future generations. In some ways, here in this slice of wilderness, it still has, despite the problems our Earth faces. Perhaps, we should all have the opportunity to change our view and travel the less traveled route. To abide in solitude for an afternoon not only calms the spirit, but also provides an uncommon appreciation for our dwelling place. Later, Mr. Wilds and I abandon the least traversed path and return on a well-worn trail, winding our way slowly down the other side of the mountain, but I take back with me a clearer understanding of what the couple in the photo saw and my reflections follow me homeward.



Two Legs, Six Legs and Eight Legs

"If all mankind were to disappear, the world would regenerate back to the rich state of equilibrium that existed ten thousand years ago. If insects were to vanish, the environment would collapse into chaos"

— E.O. Wilson

Returning to the cabin after my hike to Cloud peak, I pull off my outer jacket and find several ticks clinging to my shirt and pant legs. I begin dancing in circles, swiping them off with my hands and kicking my legs up like a member of a New York chorus line. Two ticks crawl across my stomach, so I end up yanking off my shirt, then pants, and the rest of my clothing quickly follows. Frantically, I shake out each item to make sure I get them all before putting everything back on. This is the second time this week I have had to do the "tick-dance," and I'm glad the cabin is on a secluded trail since I don't make a habit of stripping in public. "What are ticks good for anyway," I mutter.

Later, fully clothed and sitting before a fire in the potbelled stove, I think about how even the tick, though despised by humans, plays an important role in the ecological system. According to David Grimaldi, chairman and curator at the Entomology Department of the American Museum of Natural History, the tick has been around for 90 million years first appearing in fossil records during the Crustaceous period. Even though they may be the bane of hikers and campers, ticks do serve a purpose, as the often become a meal for birds, reptiles and amphibians. Just as the owl keeps the population of shrews and mice in check, the existence of ticks helps to maintain a balance within the ecosystem. Most people, however, do not find much comfort in this knowledge, since many of these organisms are the same ones that bring tick-borne illnesses to humans. We simply think of them as parasites and wish to avoid them altogether. Still, I have to acknowledge, maybe even admire, how ticks have stuck around for 90 million years—they were probably hitching a ride on the backs of dinosaurs and will probably still be around for another