

Alone Again, Naturally^[1]_[SEP]

Two Weeks in the Porcupine Mountains, Summer 2009

By Evelyn McDonnell

^[1]_[SEP]July 13, 2010

This magical cedar construction called Dan's Cabin is a testament not just to an artist, the late photographer Dan Urbanski, but to artistry. It offers a place to shelter and disconnect, to ponder and reconnect.

After Dan opened his Silver Image studio and gallery in 1977, my family -- we're summer residents of the Upper Peninsula, habitual acolytes of the Porcupine Mountains -- made yearly visits. We went to see his new shots, or his latest slide show, or to have him take portraits of us, and even the family dog. Dan shot nature out of love and people and pets out of necessity. The lush colors and mysterious fogs of his vivid landscapes and closeups might seem romanticized to people who haven't seen the Porkies with their bare eyes, but to those of us who have logged time on Lake Superior shores, Dan was a documentarian with a northern gothic aesthetic. He was a shy, serious man who seemed bookish and somewhat frail, but who was obviously hardy enough to traverse the woods and patiently catch the kind of images -- day and night -- that no one else got, or even saw. His devotion to this landscape was one of the purest artistic passions I've known. I remember when some friends tried to help spread his work beyond the UP and brought him to Milwaukee for a presentation. The big city was too much for Dan, and from then on, he was content in his Silver City base.

Many of my predecessors in the artists in residency program at Porcupine Mountains State Park didn't have the honor of knowing Dan. They describe him in almost mythic, mystic terms in the cabin's log -- the legendary status that death confers. The log set a high bar for me as I kept my own journal, wondering what I could write that would measure up to previous discussions of ways to discover and represent the woods and waterways, according to the needs and dictates of different media. I've been coming to this quiet corner of the globe since I was a little girl; I even married a local boy. But through the Dan's Cabin log, I learned to see the Porkies through the eyes of painters, photographers, musicians, poets, and filmmakers.

The importance of what the Friends of the Porkies are doing with the artist in residency program can't be understated: They are creating a record of and a legacy for this place that remains remote from American knowledge and imagination. Would Yosemite or the

Redwoods rear up so strongly in the public mind without the work of Ansel Adams or John Muir? Maybe not all, but maybe one of, or maybe collectively, these artists will do something similar for the Upper Peninsula. Maybe that's what Dan started.

My goal during my residency was to reflect upon reflection. In a 21st century world brought together by catastrophe and technology, what does it mean to go out in the woods and get away from it all? Is it retro escapism? Or a healthy respite? In the age of

hyperconnectivity, when you can type a hundred characters on your cell phone about the brilliant idea you just had on the toilet and instantly Tweet your profundity out to hundreds of "friends" or "followers" miles away, what does it mean to unplug? Is it more necessary than ever, or more futile?

Dan's Cabin is a cedar-sided shelter with high cathedral ceilings and a wraparound porch, nestled on the side of a hill overlooking Mud Creek. It's a quarter-mile hike in from the Union Springs rustic campground. While there's a swing seat overlooking the creek, a handsome vintage iron wood stove, a bed made from logs and branches, and a campfire circle, there's no phone, internet, electricity, or even running water. So much for daily status updates on Facebook.

I'm a writer and editor in a moment of transition during a time of great change, moving from East Coast to West, going back to school to learn more about the ways technology is changing my vocation (and to enhance my own career options). I'm also a mother of one rambunctious six-year-old boy (who was with me part of the time at Dan's, trading time with my husband, Bud) and stepmother of two girls just entering adulthood. In the Porkies, I pressed pause on a busy life.

Instead of surfing the 'net, I reread *Walden*, Henry David Thoreau's 19th century classic about his own time spent sequestered in the woods of Massachusetts. His admonishment of Americans' addiction to media and correspondence is both stinging and strikingly relevant. Long before instant messaging and CNN, HDT proclaimed, "Don't believe the hype." "To a philosopher all *news*, as it is called, is gossip, and they who edit and read it are old women over their tea," he scolds. He does occasionally over-romanticize the woods experience. I haven't felt as stirred by the insects I've encountered on my stay as Thoreau does in this passage: "I was as much affected by the faint hum of a mosquito making its invisible and unimaginable tour through my apartment at earliest dawn, when I was sitting with door and windows open, as I could be by any trumpet that ever sang of

fame.”

Still, I think the essence of Thoreau’s goal in the woods is shared by most of those who seek answers in nature: “I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived. I did not wish to live what was not life, living is so dear; nor did I wish to practise resignation, unless it was quite necessary. I wanted to live deep and suck out all the marrow of life, to live so sturdily and Spartan-like as to put to rout all that was not life, to cut a broad swath and shave close, to drive life into a corner, and reduce it to its lowest terms, and, if it proved to be mean, publish its meanness to the world; or if it were sublime, to know it by experience, and be able to give a true account of it in my next excursion.”

Here is my account of my excursion in Dan’s Cabin. My aim is true.

July 5, 2009

First day of my artist residency in Dan’s Cabin. I’m grateful for this opportunity. It’s a beautiful place. I like to be on an artist residency, to be considered an artist.

The goal these two weeks is to unplug – even though I must check in every couple days to see if there is news on our house sale, or on my job, or on school, or on any of the one million huge pending changes in our life of upheaval. This is the calm eye of the storm. I need it. To have no cell phone, internet, phone, TV – not even a lightbulb or flush toilet. I must admit to at first feeling a little panicked. How on earth can I survive unplugged? The car is a quarter mile away, on the other side of a river. Am I really a nature girl, or do I just like to play one on Facebook? And why do I keep finding myself writing in my journal in txt msg shorthand?

Already, how much better Cole behaves without any electronic distractions/ stimulation, and I am with him.

July 6^{SEP} “Is a wolfless north woods any north woods at all?” -- Aldo Leopold.^{SEP} The wolf quote is a propos for this trip. There are tracks down on the bridge that

Cole and I studiously measured and checked against a tracking book. Length: too big for coyotes, just right for wolves. Stride: same. Straddle: Could be wolf or coyote. Verdict: Wolf, or maybe dog (the tracks are on a trail). The reintroduction of wolves to the UP is a

hot topic of debate. Us tree-hugger types are all for it, and delight in the increasing reports of their sightings, or even of sightings of their poop. But Krug's, the shop and bakery in Twin Lakes, sells hats and T-shirts that say: "Addicted to Wolves: Smoke a Pack a Day," with a picture of a rifle and smoking barrel.

I suppose wild canines are a lot more charming when you come across their trail on a summer vacation hike than when they are killing your cats, or chicken, or the deer that you believe you have a greater right to kill because you are higher up on the food chain – or at least have given yourself the moral authority of a gun. When call-in guests to local radio talk shows rant about Doomsday -- when wolves are going to come steal their children -- I see the telltale droppings of right-wing fearmongers, for whom wolves are apparently part of the gay abortionist Al Qaeda assault on the security of the American home, if not the homeland.

The highlight of our stay so far is the nest we've discovered high in a tree behind Dan's Cabin. We might never have noticed it if we hadn't been walking through the woods and seen all the white bird poop on the ground last evening. This morning, I realized you can see the nest from the cabin: I'm sitting at the table now, looking up at it. We could see two fuzzy white heads sticking over the top of the braided branches. Through the binoculars, we watched them watching us. They seem to have black around their eyes and on their wings. We don't know if they are eagles or hawks. We are waiting/ hoping to see a parent, and then we'll know.

We were gone most of the day today, hiking the Escarpment Trail with our friends Lili and Joseph and family. It was a lovely day – clear, blue skies on top of green vistas of forest. This isn't just green: This is a rich carpet of multiple shades – emerald and kelly and spring and dark forest, all colliding and sliding into each other, as if painted by some French impressionist in an ecstatic verdant phrase – really high on grass.

I think what this sojourn might be about is privacy. This is the essential American right that has been wrested from us by technology – that we have too easily given away. We gladly bare all on MySpace and don't worry about what Google is doing with all that personal info it stores every time we search for a book or recipe. After all, what kind of throwback wants solitude in the age of social networking? Yet I worry that the era of connectedness is also the era of entrapment: That's why it's called the *Internet*, the world wide *web*. We think we are citizen journalists writing a global democratic revolution in our txt msg hieroglyphs. But really, aren't these the scribbled SOS's of the trapped fly?

And yet I must confess: Atop the escarpment, we found a patch of blueberries. Like bears just wakened from hibernation, we scrambled across the high, sunny rock face, picking little fruits for what seemed like an hour, at first putting them all in our mouths, then filling bags. It was beautiful, joyful, meditative work, for the kids and the grownups. Bent over, picking, I felt a strange vibration in my jeans pocket. Since we're having trouble with our camera, I had brought my iPhone along on the hike to take pictures. High up on the hill, I picked up a signal. I happily checked my voice mail and email for the first time in days. Out there among the blueberries, I found out how my brother is doing in China and Mom's trip is going in Portland.

July 7

Fantastic view of the babies this morning. They are balls of white down with beaks. I think they are hawks. Still no adult on the nest – where are these kids' parents? Someone report them to DCF for neglect, or maybe to the DNR. They are quiet babies, never squawking for food. One seemed to be eating this morning, so maybe they were brought vittles during the night. I hope our presence hasn't scared away the parents – though the Friends were here the weeks before our arrival, working on the cabin. Besides, surely the hawks saw this cottage 30 feet away when they built their nest.

Later: And then there were three. This morning a parent finally showed, dropped her food delivery, and flew off. Not a negligent parent, it turns out, but a working one – probably a single mom. And definitely not an eagle, but some sort of hawk – she was too fast for us to identify precisely. Then one fuzzy little head, two fuzzy little heads, three fuzzy little heads popped over the edge of the nest. For half a minute, the chick trio stood in perfect view. Cole has named them Henry, Ned, and Chloe; Bud calls them Larry, Moe, and Curly; I sometimes think of them as our kids, Karlie, Kenda, and Cole.

This afternoon we saw a deer standing about 30 feet off the path as we walked back to Dan's. It looked from Cole and me to Bud up ahead on the trail, back to Cole and me. "Pretend you don't see it," Bud said after we had all stared at it for a minute. So we continued down the path, taking sideways looks at the doe, and it's true: She didn't run, and even stopped watching us.

"He's a miniature Tom Sawyer," the bald man at the American Legion outpost in White Pine said at the Fourth of July celebration. Cole was throwing bean bags through holes at the man's game booth, his shirt off, camo jeans on, long blond hair falling on tan skin,

looking like a character from Mark Twain. I would like to turn Cole on to Tom Sawyer and Huck Finn – but I'm not sure yet how to explain about Jim, the slave.

July 8

I was away from the cabin 12 hours today. "Real life" has been sucking me back in, with email and phone calls. Barely saw the hawks, though I did get a glimpse of the parent, who was on the nest at dawn. Today, from the road, we spied two bald eagles, magnificent atop trees; two turkeys; one deer and one gray fox. We see more wildlife at the edge between nature and civilization than in the wilderness – but in the wild, you get to see it on its own turf. Nature is reclaiming Ontonagon County, Bud says. And while I feel for the unemployed and displaced – hey, I can relate! – it's not a bad change.

We went horseback riding today. I had a big, beautiful, peach and white horse that they were training, a gentle, dumb giant with one blue eye and one brown, named Carter. Because he isn't one of the pack, the other horses shun him. So Carter and I rode in the back by ourselves. I was higher in the air than usual, running into branches. The horse kept smacking into trees. It was as though Carter thought he could walk through 20-foot saplings. The ride was more work than usual, but also more fun.

July 9^{SEP} Today it is the people I observe, my parents' peers, growing old. I'm the only one

of my generation of summer residents up here right now, and the elders seem to want my company. I feared I would never see my neighbor on the beach again, and yet here he is, gaunt and pale, but still chuckling. "I bet you four years from now, only one or two of these couples will still be coming here," one septuagenarian predicts. Will a lake without these Lake people still be the Lake to me?

July 10^{SEP} The chicks are testing their wings, and either they or a parent were making quite a

racket today. I also keep hearing what I think is a whippoorwill. Who needs an iPod. Tonight it's Cole and me. We came in late, and because it's cloudy, the woods –

which are usually evanescent – were dark. Cole chattered away the whole walk, frightening off any demons. His emotions are always on 10, this boy. He fell asleep to me reading to him from my journal. He is a gift.

July 11^{SEP} The chicks have significantly more brown on them today. This morning Cole and

I lay in the bed watching both parents go back and forth. I'm certain they are broad-winged hawks: handsome dark brown bodies, a large striped fan for a tail.

July 12^{SEP} Yesterday we saw a doe and fawn in a field by the Nonesuch Trail. Today I saw a

partridge followed by a line of tiny chicks cross the South Boundary Road. Apparently parenting is a theme of this sojourn.

Bud and Cole are hiking and fishing the Little Carp today. It's supposed to be a day devoted to writing, but by the time I dropped them off, drove to town to charge my phone and make some calls, talked to a couple people as I picked up supplies, and made it back here, I only had three hours left to write. The summer days are long, epic poems here in the north, but where do the hours go?

The chicks have been my muse. Lying in the hammock writing in my journal, or sitting at the table on my laptop, I look up at them every time I pause to think. They're now little men, or women, their backs brown, sitting tall on the nest's edge. When will they fly? A parent just brought them lunch. Did they yearn to follow when she left, or are they content to be provided for? Will they leap from their roost or will they have to be pushed? One spreads her wings and hops around the nest, itching to take off.

July 13

"Welcome to the UP, where your business is our business." Dave's quip has become a theme of the trip. There's no right to privacy in a small town, not a right that's respected, at least. Cities provide anonymity; the woods, solitude. But head to town, and everyone gossips about everyone else. Sometimes, it seems that constructions of hurt feelings and bitter memories are the crutches on which people stand.

Obama said something magnificent in his Ghana speech the other day, about events always leading inexorably toward human progress. This is one of my fears about this idea of retreating to a sylvan past – isn't it anti-progressive and Luddite? Believe me, as I labor to keep the dishes sanitary and the compost toilet clean, I appreciate running water. I do not want to be a frontier woman or hippy chick toting buckets in my long peasant

skirt.

Cole has still not fully embraced this experience, though he did a great job trekking with Bud yesterday, hiking and fishing down the Little Carp all the way to Lake Superior and back. But he's bored and unsettled in the cabin at night, and has not stopped asking to watch *Spongebob*.

July 14

The chicks have just woken from their nap. One of them hopped and flapped so far I thought it was going to come out of the nest. They spend as much time looking this direction as I spend looking at them. I wonder if they're as interested in me as I am in them. Probably not.

I discovered a new nest, built into the eaves of the "Outpost," aka the compost outhouse. It's small and outlined with white droppings. I wondered if it were old and I just noticed it, but Bud says that it had been mostly broken off before, and it has been rebuilt since I've been here. Does this mean they're nesting for a second time this season? My lord, breeder birds! Then again, that's what Bud has done: Built one family early in life, then started another later on.

July 15^{SEP} Yesterday it rained for the first time in a month. My childhood friend Mary arrived in the evening just as it started coming down, so rather than pitch a tent, she stayed with me in the cabin. Wise choice: The rain turned into a classic UP thunderstorm, dramatic and intense. We sat up, catching up on almost 20 years, reminiscing about the 20 before those. Shortly after we laid down to sleep, a bomb went off. The sky exploded bright red with a thunderous crack. I yelped. "Holy crap!" Mary said. "That hit something."

I've never felt and heard lightning so close, as if we were inside it, the electricity tangible. Awake, we watched the trees flash in black silhouettes, but the light was white in the rest of the strikes – no more narrow escapes. I worried all night about the chicks. Was their tree hit? Were their parents keeping them safe? Were they as scared as I?

This morning the hitherto dry creek was bubbling; you can see a waterfall from the porch. About 30 feet from the cabin and the same distance from the hawks' maple, a great hemlock stands scalped. The lightning hit it high and pierced the trunk clear down to the

ground, scattering red strips of bark around the forest and even on the cabin roof. Nature's raw power struck close to home.

July 18^{SEP} First you go out on a limb, then you fly^{SEP} The last few days, the biggest chick has been hopping further and further out of

the nest. It goes one yard, then two, then three, up a branch -- then jumps back to the nest, wings spread. Eventually, its siblings follow, but they are more tentative. The fledgling is not a patient teacher; it's eager to go off on its own and soon leaves its nest-mates behind.

On my last day at Dan's, the young hawk flies to the next tree. I'll never forget the thrill of seeing that first awkward soar. It continues its hopping and short flights, from one branch and tree to another, until it's out of sight in the thick canopy. Like any parent watching their nest empty, I'm happy and sad. It's time for me to go as well.