

The Upper Peninsula of Michigan: The Literature of Place

The beauty of a landscape needs help to endure in your mind. You must mentally people the landscape with human history and, more important, the sense of the quality of human life you can get only from first-rate literature. . . . A mere landscape can wear out for you like the photos of beautiful women you collected as a young man. Their power wore thin because you didn't know them, their voices, the smell and touch, the qualities of their minds.

Jim Harrison, *Off to the Side: A Memoir*

The Upper Peninsula of Michigan, that part of the state lying north of the Straits of Mackinac, stretches from east to west for 350 miles along Lake Superior's southern shore. At its narrowest, near Sault Sainte Marie, the UP is barely thirty miles wide, but to the west it widens to embrace the northwestern shore of Lake Michigan, before tapering to a point near the town of Ironwood. Viewed on a map, it resembles a shark, its tail flashing in Lake Huron, its body suspended between Lakes Michigan and Superior, its head attacking northern Wisconsin. (The Keweenaw Peninsula curving northeast into Lake Superior is the shark's dorsal fin.)

For many people the UP is a fabled land of forests, rivers, lakes, and wildlife. And, I must add, of Arctic-length, snow-globe winters. In the lake-effect belt near Superior's southern shore, more than 150 inches of snow falls each winter, and in the shade of the big trees it often stays on the ground into May. Until 1957, when the Mackinac Bridge was completed, travel between lower Michigan and the UP was accomplished primarily by ferry in the summer and, for the adventuresome, by icebreaker in the winter. The bridge made the UP more accessible, but even today its population is only about three hundred thousand—about 3 percent of Michigan's population—which means that, on average, the UP is less densely populated than either Utah or Nevada.

In aboriginal times the peninsula was both revered and feared by the Ojibwe and Dakota Indians, who memorialized it in their legends and oral traditions. Their stories helped lure Euro-

American trappers, miners, and lumberjacks to the area. Today, after nearly two hundred years of intensive extractive industry—primarily iron and copper mining and logging—the UP is not a pristine landscape. But because its harsh climate has defeated most attempts at settlement and cultivation, it has retained its wild character. The magnificent old-growth white pines—some of them towered more than two hundred feet high—may be gone, but a dense second- or third-growth forest of evergreen and deciduous trees—red pines, jack pines, balsam firs, hemlocks, northern white-cedars, tamaracks, maples, basswoods, beeches, aspens, and birches—still blankets the peninsula.

Today the UP, like many areas around Lake Superior, seems to be in the process of slow and sometimes painful change. The traditional extractive industries are declining, and much of the local economy now depends on the imported cash of seasonal tourists and part-time residents. The UP has long attracted “outdoorsmen” (and “outdoorswomen”)—that is, people who like to hunt, fish (summer or winter), ride ATVs or snowmobiles, and generally hang out in the woods—and in recent years has served, infamously, as the home base or training ground of anti-government survivalists and gun nuts like Ted Nugent. But it is also beginning to attract a more mainstream, affluent crowd, and the timber-and-granite second homes of well-heeled urbanites are now joining the old-fashioned “tourist camps” scattered around the peninsula’s inland lakes.

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I am touring the UP for a few days, traveling, as is my preference, in the early fall. Driving north from Milwaukee and the city of Green Bay, I cross into Michigan over the Menominee River and follow Michigan Route 35 along the northwestern shore of Lake Michigan to Escanaba, a bustling blue-collar port and mill town near the mouth of Little Bay de Noc. Along with Marquette, located about sixty miles north on Lake Superior, Escanaba marks the western boundary of the central UP, an area that has inspired more serious literary efforts than any other around Lake Superior. I don’t know why this is the case. Perhaps it is simply a function of the area’s long and varied human history: oral tradition begets folklore, which begets written literature. Or perhaps it is the fact that over a long period of time people in the more populous parts of the Midwest have viewed the UP as a symbol or example of something worth writing about—a vestige of the American wilderness or a place where men and women pursue, or return to, a more elemental existence. Whatever the reason, one purpose of my trip is to visit (or revisit) this area that has loomed large in people’s imaginations; to consider (or reconsider) some of the literary works it has inspired; and to spend some time pondering the connections between literature and place.

From Escanaba I drive east on US Route 2 to Manistique, where in the early evening I check into a nondescript chain motel. (After inspecting my bland accommodations, I realize, too late, that I should have stopped in Escanaba and searched out the historic House of Ludington, Jim Harrison’s “favorite Midwestern hostelry.”) The next morning I continue east on Route 2 and north on Michigan Route 77 to Germfask and Seney National Wildlife Refuge, arriving in time to join a

guided tour of the refuge with an earnest young intern named Alice, a recent graduate of Northern Michigan University in Marquette with a degree in environmental education.

For the next couple of hours I ride shotgun as Alice drives a vanload of us (including several serious birders, a different breed altogether) on a circuit of dirt or gravel refuge roads. We skirt hummocky marshes and expansive pools of water with small wooded islands, prime habitat for bald eagles, ospreys, trumpeter swans, Canada geese, common loons, various species of ducks, and other migratory waterfowl. We wind through jack-pine forests and pine-stump fields in various states of regeneration and pass meadows where the Fish and Wildlife Service scatters grain on the ground to attract birds and other animals. Alice tells us that the refuge encompasses the remnants of the Great Manistique Swamp, which was logged, burned, and drained in the early twentieth century in an unsuccessful attempt to convert it to agricultural land. After the refuge was established in 1935, the Civilian Conservation Corps constructed earthen dikes and other water control structures to impound the diffuse surface flow and create the landscape we see today.

During the tour I am surprised to learn that the refuge allows the hunting of certain upland game birds—ruffed grouse and woodcock—as well as snowshoe hare, deer, and bear. Although I have nothing against hunting or hunters, the allowance of hunting strikes me as inconsistent with the concept of a “wildlife refuge.” When I ask Alice about that apparent conflict, however, she responds that one of the refuge’s purposes is to provide “recreational opportunities” for “sportsmen.” I tell her, somewhat contrarily, that it seems unfair, or at least unsporting, to lure wildlife to the refuge with enhanced habitat and supplemental food, and then to subject certain unlucky species to the sportsmen’s fusillades. She replies that the refuge only allows the “harvest” of wildlife whose populations are “healthy.” I want to tell her that that is beside the point—that it’s a question of ethics, not ecology—but she doesn’t seem interested in continuing this idiosyncratic conversation and the others on the van seem unconcerned about the fate of the animals we are attempting to observe, so I shut up.

The Manistique River, which meanders through the southeastern corner of the refuge en route to Lake Michigan, is the mother stream in this part of the UP. A few miles east of the refuge the Fox River contributes its flow to the Manistique. The Fox is famous in Michigan not only as a blue-ribbon trout-fishing stream but also—particularly for men of a certain age and disposition—as the inspiration for one of Ernest Hemingway’s best-known and best-loved short stories, “Big Two-Hearted River.” The real Big Two-Hearted River is located nearby and, unlike the Fox, flows north into Lake Superior. Hemingway probably never saw it, but he liked its evocative name and, exercising the fiction writer’s prerogative, constructed his story around it.

Hemingway visited the UP and fished the Fox with two friends in the late summer of 1919, after returning to the United States from his military service in Italy, where he had suffered a serious leg injury while driving an ambulance for the allies in World War I. Hemingway, only twenty at the time, enthusiastically described the Fox in a letter to Howell Jenkins, a war buddy and fellow fisherman: “The Fox is priceless. The big [F]ox is about 4 or five times as large as the Black [River, east of Petoskey, in lower Michigan] and has ponds 40 feet across. The little Fox is about the size of the Black and [is] lousy with them [trout]. . . . We caught about 200 and were

gone a week. We were only 15 miles from Pictured Rocks on Lake Superior. Gad that is great country.” Within a few years Hemingway had transformed his apparently exuberant trip to the UP with his two friends into a melancholy, solo camping and fishing trip taken by Nick Adams, his young fictional protagonist.

I should confess right here that I am not a big fan of Hemingway’s prose style. I respect the man’s physical prowess, his extraordinary dedication to the craft of writing, and the courageous way in which he ended his life when he believed he had exhausted his creative powers. And I recognize that he was a stylistic innovator who produced some passages of great power and beauty (including the famous opening chapter of *A Farewell to Arms*, that pointillist description of fighting on the Italian front during World War I). But over the course of a book his writing drives me nuts. So many definite and indefinite articles; so many forms of “to be”; so few adjectives and adverbs. The flat tone of narration and dialogue. The relentless ping, ping, ping of monosyllables and the insistent repetition, over and over, of words and phrases. Reading a Hemingway novel is, for me, like being subjected to Chinese water torture.

But what wears on me over the course of a novel—Hemingway’s concentrated, repetitive style—is exactly what makes his short stories so powerful, and “BTHR” is one of his best. Indeed, I think it is a masterpiece of the genre. The story itself is simple and uneventful. Nick Adams arrives by train at the abandoned, burned-over town of Seney in the UP, from which he begins hiking north, following the Big Two-Hearted River toward Lake Superior. He finds a campsite near the river in the late afternoon, pitches his tent, and cooks his dinner. As he makes coffee after dinner, he briefly recalls a previous fishing trip with friends on the Black River. The next morning, after breakfast, he collects a bottle of grasshoppers and uses them as bait to catch several trout in the river. As he fishes, he moves downstream, approaching a dark cedar swamp where the water deepens and the trees grow together overhead to block the sun. The prospect of the swamp unaccountably causes him to feel a sense of fear or dread. There, “in the fast deep water, in the half-light,” he thinks, “the fishing would be tragic. In the swamp fishing was a tragic adventure.” He decides that he doesn’t have the heart to fish the swamp that day.

Hemingway relates this simple story in minute, almost excruciating detail, from the way Nick makes his coffee after dinner to the way he baits his hooks with the grasshoppers the next morning; and that accumulating detail, combined with the flat tone and repetitive cadence of Hemingway’s prose, gradually generates an ominous air. One begins to sense that Nick is trying, through his almost obsessive attention to the mundane details of camping and fishing, to control an unspoken fear or suppress a mindless frenzy, to impose order on his life.

Nick was happy as he crawled inside the tent. He had not been unhappy all day. This was different though. Now things were done. There had been this to do. Now it was done. It had been a hard trip. He was very tired. That was done. He had made his camp. He was settled. Nothing could touch him. It was a good place to camp. He was there, in the good place. He was in his home where he had made it. Now he was hungry.

From other Nick Adams stories Hemingway's readers know that Nick is struggling to recover from the horrors of World War I—in Hemingway's now-famous phrase from *A Farewell to Arms*, Nick is searching for “a separate peace”—but the war is not mentioned in “BTHR.”

Literary theorist and critic Kenneth Burke once observed, “Form in literature is an arousing and fulfillment of desires”—an elegant, incisive formulation. As readers we like conflict followed by resolution, tension followed by release. We like to have our curiosity piqued and then satisfied. In “BTHR” Hemingway violates that principle and gets away with it. In fact, I believe that precisely what makes “BTHR” powerful is its elliptical nature—what happens between the words and lines; what, for the reader, remains unstated and unknown. We simply never learn what has happened since the last time Nick fished these northern waters.

All we get are a few—a very few—poignant clues. After dinner at his campsite, as Nick recalls his previous fishing trip on the Black River, he recollects a good-natured argument about the proper way to make coffee with one of his friends, a man named Hopkins, “the most serious man Nick had ever known.” Nick and Hopkins had argued about everything. On that trip Hopkins learned, via telegram, that he had made “millions of dollars” from an oil well in Texas; he then gave his prized possessions to his companions and departed early. Before he left, however, the friends discussed next year's trip.

They were all going fishing again next summer. The Hop Head was rich. He would get a yacht and they would all cruise along the north shore of Lake Superior. He was excited but serious. They said good-by and all felt bad. It broke up the trip. They never saw Hopkins again. That was a long time ago on the Black River.

Yes, that was a long time ago on the Black River, when the world was younger and Nick was younger, and he and his friends looked forward innocently to a future that never happened. They never saw Hopkins again.

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From the wildlife refuge I continue north on Michigan Route 77, driving through the town of Seney and toward Grand Marais. For long stretches the highway runs straight and flat through an area covered with a dense second- or third-growth forest of mixed evergreen and deciduous trees that occasionally open onto wetlands where scraggly black spruces and tamaracks sprout from thickets of tag alder and willow. Unmarked driveways or logging roads appear suddenly along the highway and, when I look down them, curve and disappear just as suddenly into the dark, encroaching forest.

Traversing the UP today, one is struck by how empty and unpopulated it is. Towns are few and far between, and many that appear on the map are in reality no more than a handful of modest houses; a small, struggling business strip (often consisting only of a gas station, an IGA, and,

perhaps, a Family Dollar or NAPA auto parts store); an abandoned, disintegrating motor court; and, on the outskirts of town, a hair-styling or tanning salon occupying the living room of someone's house. Older-model American-made sedans and pickup trucks with rust-eaten fenders sit forlornly at the ends of dirt driveways with hand-lettered signs taped to their windshields: "For Sale / \$2800 OBO" or "Runs good / Make offer." There is little agriculture in the UP, and the derelict farmhouses and overgrown orchards along the highways are melancholy reminders of a time in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries when promoters marketed the land to naïve, hopeful immigrants unaware of the peninsula's long, brutal winters. ("On this back road the land / has the juice taken out of it," Jim Harrison wrote in a poem about northern Michigan, "stump fences surround nothing / worth tearing down / by a deserted filling station / a Veedol sign, the rusted hulk / of a Frazer, 'live bait' / on battered tin.")

The radio is dominated by country music, oldies rock, and syndicated talk-radio, the last, of course, consisting largely of pop psychologists dispensing tough love to their confused callers or political pundits of various stripes railing about the hot-button issues of the day. But what I have just said is, of course, a gross generalization, for in recent years radio translators have brought more diverse programming to many rural areas, including the UP, so that even here, in this remote hinterland, one can now find, at the lower end of the FM dial, stations playing classical or jazz music.

The food typically served in restaurants in the UP is not the kind that cardiologists recommend for their patients. The most popular dinner offerings are pasties, fried fish, steaks, hamburgers, and pizza. High-calorie, high-fat food to get the people through the long winters. As is true in many rural, working-class areas, cigarette smoking is still relatively common among the UP's residents, so that entering a road house along the highway one is often greeted by the unappetizing smells of cooking grease, stale cigarette smoke, and spilled beer. The UP is not, and will probably never be, a gourmet's destination.

But, of course, citified diversions and fine dining are not what draw people to the UP. Rather, what draws people here today is what has always drawn people here: vast untracked forests abounding with wildlife; myriad lakes and free-flowing rivers teeming with fish; extreme, dramatic weather; the mysterious allure of the wilderness, the big woods.

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After buying some groceries in the town of Grand Marais, I turn west onto Sable Lake Road, Alger County Route H58, and wend my way into Pictured Rocks National Lakeshore, which stretches along the southern shore of Lake Superior from here to the town of Munising, about forty miles away. The road is paved for only a short distance before narrowing to a sandy, often-washboarded route that dips and curves through a dark, lovely forest en route to the Twelvemile Beach campground, located between Au Sable Point and the Pictured Rocks themselves, where I am lucky to claim the last available campsite on the lakeside of the campground loop.

Shortly after I arrive, a brief shower dampens the campground and forest, and I sit in the car and doze until it passes. As the sky clears, I rouse, climb out of the car, stretch for a few minutes, and wander down to the lakeshore, at the base of a sandy bluff behind the campsite. To the north the view from the narrow beach is clean and pacific. Beneath the pale, rain-washed sky the lake's smooth, lapis-colored surface extends beyond the earth's curve, forming a featureless horizon. The beach itself is deserted but for a man and woman a couple of hundred yards to the southwest silently wading in the sun-dappled shallows. The air is still, and the only sounds are the gentle, rhythmic sougning of the surf on the sand and a seagull's occasional caw. A benign afternoon at Twelvemile Beach.

Returning to my campsite, I open a bottle of beer that I sip as I patrol my tiny domain, examining the varied plants growing in the sandy soil (including several species of fern whose fronds have been burned by an early frost) and picking up small pieces of litter inadvertently dropped by previous campers. Then I set up my tent, unroll and inflate my Therm-a-Rest pad inside, and lay my sleeping bag on top, shaking it to fluff the down. My sleeping chamber prepared for the night, I settle at the picnic table, where I heat a simple stew on my camp stove as the late-afternoon sun fills the forest understory with oblique, liquid light. The air is balmy and aromatic, smelling faintly of pine resin and balsam, and I surrender to the peaceful mood of the day. Butterflies levitate silently in the shafts of light, and a few flies and yellow jackets, attracted by the smell of my dinner, buzz my head and table, but I am too tired or relaxed to rise to their challenge, instead gently shoos them away. Although the campground is nearly full, it is remarkably quiet, and from my picnic table I hear the wavelets lapping at the lakeshore. As I slowly eat my meal and then clean my dishes, the world begins to dissolve into dusk and darkness. Across the big lake to the north, toward Canada, a violet mist floats above the water's surface, conjuring mythic islands and worlds: Atlantis, Arcadia, Avalon.

This area is famous as the setting for Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's 1855 epic poem *The Song of Hiawatha*, which interpreted and dramatized certain Ojibwe Indian oral traditions. Longfellow, a professor at Harvard University, never visited the UP, and his *Hiawatha* is a hybrid creation of his imagination. He modeled the form of his poem on the *Kalevala*, the mythic tale often regarded as the Finnish national epic, and borrowed much of its substance from the ethnographic writings of Henry R. Schoolcraft, a prominent white American who served as the Indian agent for the Ojibwe and Ottawa tribes at Sault Sainte Marie from 1822 to 1841. Schoolcraft had become acquainted with the region in 1820, when he had been the geologist on an expedition to explore and map the Upper Great Lakes under the direction of Lewis Cass, then governor and superintendent of Indian affairs for Michigan Territory. Schoolcraft recounted his impressions of the expedition in a book dauntingly titled *Narrative Journal of Travels through the Northwestern Regions of the United States, extending from Detroit through the Great Chain of American Lakes to the Sources of the Mississippi River, Performed as a Member of the Expedition under Governor Cass, in the Year 1820*. During his tenure as Indian agent Schoolcraft married a granddaughter of an Ojibwe chief, often visited the local Indian villages, and recorded Indian culture, traditions, and lore in more than twenty scholarly and popular books.

Longfellow's poem, as many schoolchildren know even today, tells the life story, in twenty-two cantos, of an Ojibwe man-hero named Hiawatha. Born of Wenonah, the granddaughter of the moon, and Mudjekeewis, the arrogant, temperamental West Wind, Hiawatha is raised by Nokomis, his maternal grandmother, after Wenonah dies of heartbreak, when Mudjekeewis abandons her. Under Nokomis's tutelage Hiawatha learns the traditions of his people and the ways of the forest and, true to the heroic tradition, endures as he grows into manhood a series of trials, from meeting, confronting, and reconciling with his father; to wrestling with Mondamin, an emissary of the "Master of Life," whose defeated body is transfigured into maize; to battling Nahma, the armored sturgeon, in the depths of Gitche Gumee; to slaying Megissogwon, the evil Magician. Hiawatha prays and fasts, not for personal gain or aggrandizement, but for the betterment of the Indian peoples and nations. Eventually he woos and marries the beautiful Dakota maiden Minnehaha, "Laughing Water," which brings about a sort of Periclean era of peace and prosperity among the tribes. But of course that era ends, as it must, when malevolent spirits cause a series of misfortunes, culminating in a winter famine that kills Minnehaha. As is often the case—curiously—in Indian legends, Hiawatha then relates a vision of the coming of the white man to the New World and the eventual defeat of the Indian nations. Finally, in the last canto, as Hiawatha stands on the lakeshore on a bright summer morning, he is visited by "the Black-Robe chief, the Pale-face / With the cross upon his bosom." Hiawatha welcomes the priest and his entourage; invites them into his wigwam; listens politely (if noncommittally) to their Christian proselytizing; and, as his guests slumber through the hot, still afternoon, quietly departs in his canoe toward the northwest, "To the Islands of the Blessed / . . . To the land of the Hereafter!"

Hiawatha was wildly popular in its own day, selling five thousand copies in the first five weeks after publication, and remains a part, at least in edited form, of many elementary or junior high school curricula. But it was not an unequivocal success. Some contemporary critics accused Longfellow of adapting more than just the form of the *Kalevala*. Moreover, as modern literary scholar and critic Daniel Aaron observed, "[I]n borrowing *Kalevala*'s thumping, eight-syllabled trochaic verse form as the one best suited to his purpose, he left himself open to parodists unable to resist the fun of burlesquing *Hiawatha*'s tom-tom rhythms, its parallelisms and repetitions, and its plethora of what to the humorists were comical sounding Indian names." It is particularly hard for a modern reader, steeped in the facile satire of television and other popular media, to read even the first verse of *Hiawatha* without imagining sophomoric parodic riffs:

Should you ask me, whence these stories?
Whence these legends and traditions,
With the odours of the forest,
With the dew and damp of meadows,
With the curling smoke of wigwams,
With the rushing of great rivers,
With their frequent repetitions,
And their wild reverberations,

As of thunder in the mountains?

Part of the problem lies in the natural evolution of language and literary taste and the passage of time, which have taken American poetry ever farther from the rigid meter and perfect rhyme of Longfellow's era. And part of the problem lies in Longfellow's decision to employ curiously formal diction ("whence") and spelling that was quaint even in his own day ("odours"). I suspect that by employing such archaisms Longfellow was striving for a certain grand effect: he was trying to write an old-fashioned epic. Unfortunately, the form and rhetorical devices he employed, tired even in his own day, have long passed out of fashion and show no sign of popular revival.

For modern readers the poem's narrative line is also problematic. *Hiawatha* is a traditional hero-tale, relating the story of a young man who ventures alone into the dangerous unknown; stoically endures hardship and privation; encounters and either defeats or befriends various supernatural beings; gains strength and knowledge through his adventures; and finally returns home to share his experiences and wisdom with his people. But many modern readers find his story uninteresting, even tedious, because Hiawatha appears to have no faults. He acts and speaks in a manner that is invariably, monotonously noble and altruistic. And when misfortune finally strikes him and his people, it is not because of an inherent tragic flaw or mistake, but because of events completely out of his control. Which may be symbolic of the tragedy of the New World, but which is not engaging to the modern sensibility. In literature, as in life, we find fallible men more interesting than infallible gods.

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The next morning I awake to a freshening breeze off the lake. The temperature is still mild, but the wind has churned the lake's surface into two- to three-foot swells that break over a sandbar a hundred yards offshore before re-forming and surging toward the beach. I decide to take advantage of the continuing warm weather to fulfill an idiosyncratic lifelong dream: to swim in Lake Superior. Surprisingly, the water temperature on this early-fall day, in the shallows at least, nearly matches the air temperature—in the low sixties. I wade carefully through the swells and finally, standing waist-deep, take the dive into deeper water. I emerge with a howl, shivering and shaking like a wet dog. But the sun, filtered by a few high cirrus clouds, provides just enough warmth to blunt the chill, and I spend fifteen or twenty minutes relishing this new experience, swimming a few strokes back and forth parallel to the beach, trying to bodysurf the larger waves, and peering at the sandy or pebbled bottom through the water's clear, refractive lens.

After a leisurely breakfast I pack up my camp and drive slowly southwest on County Route H58 to the Chapel Basin area of the national lakeshore, where I hike a 9.6-mile loop through the forest to the lake, around Grand Portal Point, and then back to the trailhead along a series of gullies and streams. For almost half its distance the trail follows the lakeshore above the Pictured Rocks themselves, strata of light-colored Cambrian sandstone forming vertical cliffs that rise as high as

two hundred feet above the water and that have been stained and streaked in variegated tones of white, black, brown, red, pink, yellow, and green by manganese, iron, copper, and limonite leaching out of the rock. Thus the name, first applied by Schoolcraft during the 1820 Cass expedition, although the area was well known to the Ojibwes and was a prominent landmark for early European explorers.

In places the lake's wave action has carved alcoves and shallow caves in the base of the cliffs; sculpted the sandstone into pillars, turrets, and other fanciful shapes; and eroded ledges that overhang the lake, so that one can walk to land's end and look straight down, through the pellucid water, to the bouldery bottom twenty or thirty feet below the surface. The colors of the water on this sunny day are astonishing: from turquoise—a color I want to call “Caribbean”—at the base of the cliffs; to sapphire in the shallower water; to cobalt in the deeper; and finally to indigo far out on the lake. In several places the wind has eroded the sandstone just below the cliffs into hoodoos and other weird aeolian features that recall the arid badlands of the American West. With the pale blue northern sky arching overhead and the deep green forest stretching inland from the clifftops, the landscape is lovely—indeed, on a day like this one, almost sublime.

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After completing the trail loop, I drive into Munising, where, after making some discreet inquiries at a local visitor center, I head for the Sunset Motel on the Bay, a mom-and-pop establishment located on a side street on the eastern side of town whose rooms face the water. When I enter the tidy front office, I discover that in this case mom is Carmon Decet, a blond-haired woman in her late thirties with a broad, pretty face, taut Scandinavian skin, and wolf-grey eyes. She smiles easily when I walk in, and, as is only occasionally the case in our tense, frenetic modern world, I immediately feel relaxed and comfortable around her. Although I am normally quite guarded around people I have just met, when she tells me that she rented her last room a few minutes ago, I throw up my arms and wail theatrically.

She laughs and then volunteers that she and her husband own two houses near the motel and that she will rent me one up the street with three bedrooms, a bathroom, and a full kitchen for the remarkable sum of \$75 a night.

“Feel free to use the washer and dryer,” she adds helpfully.

I am aware that after my time in the woods I look a bit disheveled and probably smell equivalently. (I think this is not what Longfellow meant by “the odours of the forest.”)

I promptly accept her offer. In doing so, I tell her, with exaggerated seriousness, that having access to a washer and dryer means that I won't have to wear the same dirty underwear tomorrow.

Without missing a beat she smiles and responds in kind. “Well, I'm glad. My twelve-year-old son thinks it's pretty neat to do that, but most of us don't.”

She wraps her mouth around each vowel and speaks in the slightly sing-song cadence typical of the UP, a legacy of the many Scandinavian immigrants who settled in the area. She looks straight at me as she speaks, her eyes wide and playful. Her blonde hair touches her shoulders.

After I register, we chat for a few more minutes, during which I learn that she and her husband, Tony, are native “Yoopers” and that although they have visited Orlando, Phoenix, and Las Vegas—golden cities of the Sun Belt—they have no intention of leaving the UP. Carmon manages the motel, while Tony works for wages in town. In addition to their son, David, they have an eight-year-old daughter named Karlee, who rides her bike back and forth across the motel’s parking lot as we talk, and a terrier named Maddie, who keeps Carmon company at the front desk and sticks her nose under the doggie-barricade to beg scratches from me.

Carmon has an unassuming air typical of rural, Midwestern women; a sort of wholesome sensuality; and a quiet competence that, I assume, comes from raising a family and managing a small business at the same time.

When I ask Carmon for a restaurant recommendation, she bites her lower lip pensively, cocks her head, and looks out the window toward the bay. At that moment she is an image of unstudied loveliness.

Later, after showering and changing clothes, I follow Carmon’s recommendation, driving to a local restaurant near downtown Munising for an early dinner. There, as I devour a cheeseburger and fries, I reflect on my day: my invigorating, early-morning swim; my solitary, sweaty trek through the forest; my innocent flirtation with Carmon. This, I find myself thinking, was a Jim Harrison kind of day. A day of both physical and spiritual pursuits and pleasures.

Jim Harrison is the contemporary writer most closely associated with this area, and arguably one of the half-dozen greatest living American writers. Born in 1937, Harrison spent his boyhood in Reed City, a small town in rural lower Michigan, among his extended family, occasionally helping with chores at his grandparents’ farm and hunting and fishing—sometimes alone, sometimes with his father or paternal uncles—in the woods near a family cabin outside of town. In his 2002 memoir, *Off to the Side*, he recalls a boyhood that, for all the hardships of rural life during the Depression and World War II, was nearly idyllic:

What have I forgotten? Waking to the animal sounds that seem to comfort one, easing the soul into consciousness. There were no alarm clocks in the house. This ancient cycle was so embedded that no reminders were needed. The body’s clock sufficed and through the screen window and the skein of a mosquito or fly’s whine and buzz there was a sow’s untroubled grunt, the muffled squeal of a piglet, the neighbor’s dog, the milk truck two miles away, a cow lowing, a horse stomping a sleepy foot, and the long-awaited rooster’s crow which, though it might still be dark, dispelled the inevitable night demons.

What else have I forgotten? My young aunt bathing in a tin tub in the kitchen. . . .

Nothing in Harrison’s early life suggested a literary calling, but as a boy he began to read voraciously, and while still a teenager he decided that he wanted to be a writer. Except for his passion for literature, he was an apathetic student, and at nineteen he left school and home,

hitchhiking to New York City with ninety dollars in his pocket and a cardboard box packed with clothes, books, and a used typewriter, intent on living the bohemian life. (Harrison arrived in Greenwich Village about five years before another errant Midwesterner, Robert Zimmerman.) Thus began a pattern of traveling between Michigan, where he intermittently pursued his academic career, and the cultural meccas on the East and West Coasts—Boston and San Francisco in addition to New York—where he pursued the literary life. Despite the cities' allure, however, he always returned home to Michigan, to his family and the rural landscapes of his youth.

Two chance, tragic events helped shape Harrison's personality and psyche. When he was seven, a careless playmate hit him with a broken bottle, blinding him in his left eye, and when he was twenty-four, a drunk driver crashed head-on into his family's car, instantly killing his father and younger sister. (At the time of the accident they were driving north from the family's home in Michigan to hunt deer on a relative's land. Harrison himself had considered joining them but at the last minute had decided not to.) The first set him apart from other children and at an early age turned his vision inward; and the second caused him to consider the larger themes that dominate his later work: life and death, flesh and spirit, the sacred and the profane. In large part, I think, his life and work since then have been attempts to resolve those essential human dualities, to accept that one cannot exist without the other—that life on earth is an indissoluble whole—and in so doing to salve his sense of loss. For solace and inspiration he has always returned to the natural world. "In the woods," he wrote in a 1991 essay, "it is still 1945, and there is the same rain on the roof that soothed my burning eye, the same wind blowing across freshwater. The presence of the coyotes, loons, bear, deer, bobcats, crows, ravens, heron and other birds that helped heal me then, are still with me now."

Harrison's literary output has been prolific. Since 1965 he has written eleven books of poetry, nine novels, four collections of novellas (many modern critics consider him one of the few masters of this difficult form), two collections of nonfiction, a memoir, and many screenplays. It wasn't until the late 1970s, however, with the publication of *Legends of the Fall* and the sale of the movie rights for the title novella that he achieved any sort of financial success. Because he is from Michigan and early in his career wrote about traditionally masculine activities—hunting and fishing, the outdoors, drinking—reviewers often likened him to Hemingway. But Harrison's male protagonists were not stalwart, stoic heroes like Frederic Henry or Robert Jordan; rather, they tended to be flawed, insecure, sometimes comically neurotic human beings. And Harrison's prose, unlike Hemingway's, was, from the beginning, profuse and exuberant. Harrison himself eschewed the comparison, often mentioning William Faulkner as an important formative literary influence, and with the publication of *Dalva* in 1988—a plains-family saga told in large part from his female protagonist's point of view—he seems to have laid the comparison to rest.

I have always thought that a more apt comparison is to Saul Bellow. In his range of tone (sometimes from tragic to comic in a single paragraph) and his ability to blend earthly matters and spiritual concerns, Harrison seems to me a rustic Bellovian. By putting it that way, I do not intend to denigrate Harrison. On the contrary, Bellow was a great writer—he won the Pulitzer Prize, three National Book Awards, and the Nobel Prize for Literature—and I think Harrison deserves to sit in

his company. But Harrison's natural milieu is the country, and Bellow was, to borrow Alfred Kazin's phrase, a walker in the city.

Physically, Harrison is a large, bearlike man—almost, it seems, a creature of the woods where he grew up. He is a man of legendary appetites and excesses—particularly gastronomic and alcoholic—and a gourmet who prepares fresh game and fish in a manner that recalls the *haute cuisine* served in the most adventuresome five-star restaurants. His prose is likewise wild and rich:

Gullies, hummocks in swamps, swales in the middle of large fields, the small alluvial fan created by feeder creeks, undercut riverbanks, miniature springs, dense thickets on the tops of hills: like Bachelard's attics, seashells, drawers, cellars, these places are a balm to me. Magic (as opposed to the hocus-pocus of miracles) is equated to the quality of attentiveness. Perhaps magic *is* the quality of attentiveness, the ultimate attentiveness. D. H. Lawrence said that the only aristocracy is that of consciousness. Once I sat still so long I was lucky enough to have a warbler sit on my elbow. Certain of the dead also made brief visits.

And sometimes more than a little amusing, particularly when he is describing the epic road trips for which he has become well known:

When I'm settled into my motel in the early evening, I invariably call the local radio station for a hot dinner tip. I figure disc jockeys are layabouts like writers and they would likely know the best places to eat. This works pretty well if you're willing to settle for a little less and can develop the uncritical state of mind that is required if you're ever going to get out of bed in the first place. In Alliance, Nebraska, I had a fabulous two-pound rib steak, watched a soft-core porn film on TV, and went to an American Legion country dance, where I jumped around like a plump kangaroo to work off the protein rush.

But all is not lightness. Like many creative people, he is prone to periods of depression—seven “whoppers” in his life, by his count—and even occasional hallucinatory episodes:

Every year or so in the late evening, usually right after I go to bed, my mind will enter a whirling fugal state where all the stops are pulled with my mind rushing all over the earth and well into space, to the depths of the ocean where the process slows and you can walk along the ocean's bottom. You're literally out of control though not at all violently, passing through the homes of friends, huts and kraals in Africa, the bottom of the Amazon's many rivers, inside the mouth of a lion, the short nap (a split second) in the heart of a whale.

Geographically, Harrison's stories often originate in Michigan and then spiral outward, sometimes to the ends of the earth. That is true of four of his early novels—*Wolf, Farmer, Warlock*, and *Sundog*—and many of the essays collected in *Just before Dark*. With *Dalva* and its sequel, *The Road Home*, his focus shifted west to Nebraska. He returned to Michigan, however, with the novel *True North*, published in 2004, and its sequel, *Returning to Earth*, published in 2007. Although the two novels differ in form, together they relate the modern history of the Burketts, a prominent Marquette, Michigan, family that acquired its wealth through the ruthless exploitation of the UP's mineral and timber resources (and its people) in the nineteenth century.

True North is essentially the coming-of-age story of the family's male scion, David Burkett. In reaction to his father, the dissolute (and alcoholic) heir to the family fortune, David decides to research his family's role in the plunder of the UP's virginal resources and to atone for his family's historical misdeeds by publishing the results of his research. His project consumes him, and over the course of several years he writes hundreds of pages, finally publishing a condensed version in a dozen UP newspapers, to little notice or effect. His salvation comes only with his father's sudden, grisly death in the Gulf of Mexico, the long-deferred consequence of an unpardonable act—the rape of a friend's daughter—he had committed years before.

Returning to Earth picks up the family's story ten years later and describes the excruciating death of David's brother-in-law, Donald, from amyotrophic lateral sclerosis—Lou Gehrig's disease—and the effect of his death on those around him. Donald, the son of the Burketts' former yardman, is a simple, good-hearted man of mixed Finnish-Ojibwe blood (a combination not uncommon in the UP). He and David's sister, Cynthia, married when they were teenagers, as her family was in the throes of disintegration. Donald seems an embodiment of the UP's collective spirit, a hard-working man familiar with Ojibwe traditions who also moves quietly through the modern, non-Indian world. He wishes to be buried in Canada, north of Sault Sainte Marie, near the place where he once spent three days fasting alone in the woods, and in large part the novel is the story of how his loved ones accommodate his wishes, setting him properly, as he puts it, “on the ghost road.”

The novel consists of four equal-length chapters, each narrated in the first person by a different character: first Donald; then Kenneth, the son of David's former wife, who helps care for Donald in his last days; then David; and finally Cynthia. Although the chapters are framed and arranged in chronological order, each follows its narrator's meandering stream of consciousness through time and space, with each character adding nuance or perspective to stories told by the others. The result is a fugue-like composition that, by the end of the book, artfully circles back to its beginning. (Thus in its form *RTE* is reminiscent of one of Faulkner's masterpieces, *The Sound and the Fury*. Given Harrison's admiration for Faulkner, the similarity is probably not coincidental.)

The novel's action ranges across the UP, from Iron Mountain in the west, where Kenneth visits his grandfather, an iron miner whose legs were crushed in an accident at a mine in which Burketts owned an interest, in a nursing home; to Marquette, where the Burkett family's grand ancestral home overlooks the town and harbor; to Grand Marais, where David owns a ramshackle

hunting cabin in the woods near the shore of Lake Superior; to the Bay Mills Indian Community, where Donald and Cynthia raised their two children; to Sault Sainte Marie in the east, where the family crosses into Canada on Donald's last journey on earth. As is common in Harrison's novels, animals figure prominently in the story. During his three-day fast Donald is visited by various animals curious about this odd, quiet creature in their midst. A female bear and three large ravens seem to hold special significance for him, to be his personal guardians or totems. As he talks to the ravens, explaining why he is there, Donald begins to imagine the world from their perspective. That leads to a revelation, which Donald summarizes with disarming simplicity:

In my three days I was able to see how creatures including insects looked at me rather than just how I saw them. I became the garter snake that tested the air beside my left knee and the two chickadees that landed on my head. I was lucky enough to have my body fly over the countries of earth and also to walk the bottom of the oceans, which I'd always been curious about. I was scared at one point when I descended into the earth and when I came up I was no longer there.

. . . I doubt if my experience was much different than anyone else who spent three days up there. It was good to finally know that the spirit is everywhere rather than a separate thing. I've been lucky to spend a life pretty close to the earth up here in the north. I learned in those days that the earth is so much more than I ever thought it was. It was a gift indeed to see all sides at once.

Returning to Earth may not be a great novel—as readers we know in the beginning what the end will be, robbing the story of dramatic tension, and the voices of Kenneth, David, and Cynthia blend together—but it is a compelling read. As always, Harrison juxtaposes mundane and ethereal matters in unexpected and provocative ways, and his prose is a force to be reckoned with. He disdains commas and unnecessary punctuation, and like a mountain torrent his sentences rush and leap from rock to cognitive rock. I read the novel straight through, swept along by the power of the language and the pleasure of discovering, in the torrent's spume and spray, new variations on Harrison's old, recurrent themes: a reverence for the natural world, ruminations on food and cooking, a fascination with dream life, spiritual meditations, and emotional and sexual longing and consummation. Or, as Harrison once put it, the whole “incalculable messiness of life.”

* * *

A couple of days later, as I drive west to Au Train and then south toward Escanaba on the UP's two-laned back roads, completing my circuit, I find myself thinking about the connection between literature and place and the influence of one on the other. Physical setting is an important part of most works of literature, and what engages us as readers and draws us into a writer's world of words is often the vivid evocation of a particular time and place. Part of the craft of writing consists of selecting and describing the right sensory details to conjure that imaginary scene (the

oblique sunlight on an October afternoon, a cool breeze off a rippled sapphire lake, the skittering of golden aspen leaves across dark granite). And over the course of a book those sensory details form a melodic line in what should be a rich, polyphonic work.

In an homage to James Jones, written when he died in 1977, Joan Didion observed, “Certain places seem to exist because someone has written about them. . . . A place belongs forever to whoever claims it the hardest, remembers it most obsessively, wrenches it from itself, shapes it, renders it, loves it so radically that he remakes it in his image.” Didion believed that in *From Here to Eternity* Jones had accomplished that feat, had captured or created (or re-created) a particular time and place—Schofield Barracks and Honolulu on the eve of World War II, the world that Prewitt, Warden, Maggio, and the other characters in the novel so vividly inhabit.

As usual, Didion’s sharp intellect and clean prose cut to the heart of the matter. A good writer can create an imaginary world that has as much cognitive and emotional weight as the one we inhabit day to day. Thus Faulkner’s Yoknapatawpha County seems to me as real and substantial as any actual location in Mississippi. And if a good writer incorporates into his or her work an actual place—particularly a place we know—then the writing can alter our perception of it, so that reading his or her work is like walking outside on a bright summer day and putting on polarized sunglasses. Suddenly that place—and maybe it’s a place we’ve lived all our lives—seems more vivid than it ever did before.

I think about the UP—and, indeed, about the entire Lake Superior region—and the writers who have incorporated it into their work. Has it, I wonder, yet found its definitive interpreter, its oracle, its voice? Because Hemingway remains, even sixty years after his death, an iconic, larger-than-life figure, his image looms over those of all other writers. Most of the Nick Adams stories, however, are set in northern lower Michigan, and collectively they fill only a slender volume. For the past century and a half Longfellow’s *Hiawatha* has been the work most closely associated with the Lake Superior area; despite its faults (and the ravages of time and literary fashion), the poem retains a certain primal power. But no one would argue that it has preempted the field. UP native and Michigan Supreme Court justice John D. Voelker, writing under the pen name Robert Traver, featured the UP in several of his novels, including his best-selling *Anatomy of a Murder* (later made into a critically acclaimed movie starring James Stewart and Lee Remick), and in numerous essays and articles, including a beautiful paean to fly-fishing titled “Testament of a Fisherman,” which is still much loved and widely reproduced. But his readership and renown are otherwise limited.

Two writers associated with the larger region deserve mention. Sigurd Olson wrote nine books of essays in which he evoked, through his flinty prose and taciturn persona, the landscape and culture of the Boundary Waters of northeastern Minnesota. But Olson was a miniaturist—for the most part he devoted himself to the careful observation and description of the glaciated spit of rock he called “Listening Point”—and rarely mentions nearby Lake Superior in his work. Aldo Leopold wrote elegant, prescient essays about conservation from his farm in southern Wisconsin but, to the best of my knowledge, never approached the big lake.

So, in the end, I return to Jim Harrison. Although he is a native of lower Michigan and not the UP, Harrison has long been drawn to this place, and it has exerted a strong influence on his life and work. He has incorporated its landscapes into his fiction, poetry, and essays, and his best work evokes its wildness, beauty, and desolation. More than any other writer, he has staked his claim, embracing it as no one else has. But is that enough? In recent years Harrison's work has gained a large audience and garnered international acclaim, and I am confident that, at least during the author's lifetime, it will continue to be read and discussed in both popular and scholarly forums. But whether it will ultimately be accorded the elevated status of literature—whether it has the requisite mass and gravity—is another question, and one I cannot answer with any certainty, because I feel too close to the work, and am wary of critical myopia.

Perhaps it is appropriate, then, that as I continue to drive toward Escanaba, I find myself thinking about the writer Harrison admires as much as any other, William Faulkner, a man universally recognized as one of the world's great writers. In the opening lines of one of his most famous novellas, in a setting far removed from the UP and Lake Superior, he captured the spirit and allure of the wilderness this area still contains and represents:

There was a man and a dog too this time. . . .

He was sixteen. For six years now he had been a man's hunter. For six years now he had heard the best of all talking. It was of the wilderness, the big woods, bigger and older than any recorded document:—of white man fatuous enough to believe he had bought any fragment of it, of Indian ruthless enough to pretend that any fragment of it had been his to convey. . . . It was of the men, not white nor black nor red but men, hunters, with the will and hardihood to endure and the humility and the skill to survive, and the dogs and the bear and deer juxtaposed against and relieved against it, ordered and compelled by and within the wilderness in the ancient and unremitting contest according to the ancient and unmitigable rules which voided all regrets and brooked no quarter. . . .

The places of literature endure in the mind.

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