

Five Chequamegon Poems

Fall Back

A small yet noteworthy joy this morning
in that I required a flashlight to guide my way
along the deer path between the house
and my office in the North Carolina woods

sunrise even a few seconds later come mid-August
promises relief from the heat index
from sweat in my eyes before breakfast

just as the multi-syllabic months on the way
signal *fall back* and its single hour
of extra but restless sleep on a Sunday morning

none of this though is match for what comes
with the October drive north
when somewhere in Indiana the phone chirps
and sets itself to Central Time

I pocket this gifted hour like a shiny coin
and spend it many times over
in the Chequamegon
in a bright hammock strung between
trail-side birches
reading skinny books with short titles
Gatsby followed by *The Sheltering Sky*
L'Étranger and *The Red Pony*

each the story of a man that covets
some small single thing
comes to hold it though briefly
and when he inevitably fumbles it away
is surprised to learn how undeserving he was

Mailed (While Knowing They'll Be Late)

Down the mossy stone stairs of my cabin
through a patch of paper-white trees
right on an ATV trail
that I stick to for nearly a mile
until it meets a rutted county road

at that corner an inexplicable mailbox
tidy and squat federal blue and faded
the promise of a 12:15 pickup (weekdays-only)

I send my kids postcards every Monday
no matter what and so of course today
from this dark forest

in a week ten days given the distance
my son in his heavy grad school beard and ballcap
my daughter chapped dirty hands and workboots
will know where I am now
with my backpack cast iron pan and books
exactly how dizzy I was after that bobcat
crossed in front of my truck
disappeared into the roadside birches

Square Lake

Not much to recommend it
a short walk-around and murk-filled
that uninspired name
well off the main trail on an
 overgrown sidepath
still somehow buggy in November

its best quality that it is situated near better lakes

given the incoming weather
I detoured and once I found it
was immediately my childself
(say seven years old)
that is I called up the portion of me
 that pangs
for unwanted inanimate things
who cracked the spines of ignored
 library books
so that they appeared read
played with Hot Wheels trucks left
 behind in the sandbox

that today worried a lake
was too often left to wish for visitors
for anyone even someone solo would do
to settle on the shore for some time
string his hammock between two
dull-leaved half-dead hardwoods
watch the stormclouds and then the rain
 once it arrived
on the relieved and finally-rippled surface

A Good Ear For Creeks

Porcupine Wilderness

Took a wrong turn inbound
but a wayoff creek its gulping sound
that almost sobbing sound any creek makes
when swallowing hard on its voice
set me right and again toward my truck

as the trailhead bridge came into view
I thought of my kids
Harper's Ferry 2005 maybe
fully-clothed and spraddle-legged
in the water
to escape the vacation heat

while this creek is so shallow
the air around it humid and raw
it is impossible to believe
it even once welcomed a child



Marengo River Trail

It thundered again and I should have turned back
but I kept eastbound past the lookout tower
stopped long enough to scold myself
for insisting *one more mile* like a selfish child

finally there it was the creek loud and clear
I crossed in one stride then some further
finally located the boundary road clearing
where I got a frightening look at the sky

by the time I reversed my route
did a few hurried uninterrupted hours of hiking
(my boots loud in the leaves)
(the red squirrels cussing me)

by the time I got back to my truck
put up my gear drank my ritual bottle of pop
read one more chapter from the skinny
book in my pack

by the time I pulled away from the trailhead
the air turned then twisted
my ears popped the twilight clicked like a lens
and there it was it was winter

The Bridge

The past month has been
of thunderstorm and snowmelt
what should be a simple creek crossing
is instead a falling-apart footbridge
soil scoured out from under each end
the entire thing about to drop into the water

this is hardly my first flood
so I head downstream
find where the dark channel narrows
and sure enough there's a six-inch
cedar plank across
price tag still fixed to the near end

slide-stepping sideways I wonder at the soul
that carried lumber eight miles into the forest
in no time I have guessed his life

Turtle Island dog-eared on the table
dinner dishes dried and put up
Bill Evans on the radio from Duluth
children asleep in other timezones
a hint of aurora visible from the porch

before bed he considers tomorrow's route
waits for the woodstove to die down
lists quiet gratitude wolves and cold water
as the rarest of Earth's elements
worries the cedar splinter
in the fat part of his thumb