

In the Land of the Black Fly

He walks under a gray sky spitting rain in old growth hemlock and maple, spring around him like a Technicolor dream, the young forest fluorescent, moss and fern and maple buds. At night, when he closes his eyes, he will see green of many shades. At night, he dreams of a cosmic efflorescence.

There are voices in the waterfalls and there are waterfalls everywhere. He can hear the miners and the loggers, the native and the tourist. He can hear animals and something he can't quite put his finger on. On nights of no moon, when he loses himself in the cabin's blackness, his body disappearing, the voices are all that exist. When he loses himself so completely, it is good to know they're talking out there.

He knows to stay on the trail. He knows to forge through mud. He knows to climb the windfall rather than circumvent. Trails are meant to stay small. But sometimes he comes upon a trail that seems as if it were planned by a cartographer with a sense of humor. So many before him have side-stepped it that a new trail is forming. He wonders if this will eventually become the real trail. Which route does one take when any step is an irrecoverable act? Whose steps will you follow?

Here in the land of the waterfall, he will always stumble on another. And another. Glorious clean water spilling over shale, pools of clear light in the deeps. But the big ones, with their tannic waters turning into orange and white froth as it plummets off shelves of ancient rock, trees shuddering in the constant cool mist, it all makes him a little uneasy. What, with their constant bravado, he can hardly hear himself think. He prefers the small ones, the out of the way, the less-noticed. What, with their tiny spills and shaded pools, they seem just a little more human.

There is a kind of slow ballet with infinite variations in the northwoods. On days of southerly breeze when the black fly swarms, the dance becomes a kind of shuffle, a shimmy of the hips, a kick of one leg, a lift of the other heel. The longer one has lived here, the more subtle and graceful the dance. But here in the land of the black fly, the oblivious is king. And he is nothing if not oblivious, having walked so long among the swarms that they almost feel like kin. Forget your netting and leave your DEET at home. The trick, he says, is simply not to care.

After long enough alone in his cabin, he forgets how to speak. He is a grizzled 50-year-old, wondering what his life amounts to. But the more he walks, the more he seems unable to even do this. He grunts. He nods to the turtle. And the birds speak to him. The phoebe repeats his own name, *phee-bee, phee-bee* and he wonders how the birds know their name. The vireo asks *where are you* and before he can answer, the birds answers his own call: *here I am, here I am*. He begins to understand why the barred owl wonders who cooks for him. And at twilight, when the Swainson's Thrush begins its liquid spiraling trill, he could almost sing.

He likes it dark in the woods, those places where the few shafts of sunlight that make it to the leaf-covered floor, have had to work to get there. Places where you can tell things are watching you: the owl from its bough, the wolf from the far ridge. The grouse drum like a quickening pulse. He likes the smell of decay, the forest's subconscious, where tiny rivulets form out of or into muddy bogs. Trickle leads to trickle slowly gathering force, like a thought, until finally it falls over a few rocks and out into the daylight.

He dreams he is a bear clawing at dead stumps, upturning the decaying roots for grubs and ants. He rises on his hind legs and sniffs the air around him. The unmistakable smell of human coming closer. He is gone once again, lumbering off deeper into the brush.

Glenn Freeman

Overlooking Lake Superior, Porcupine Mountains, June 2013

on the Birth of my Friend's Daughter

I scramble up a hillside beside the trail
onto a rocky ridge overlooking
a thousand acres of young hardwood
sloping toward Lake Superior—
maple, oak, birch, a few white pines.
The lake stretches to the horizon.
Because we are occasionally able
to get it right, these woods will not be logged
again. You may have the pleasure
of seeing this too, the same scene
barely changed, only like you
a little older. Lichen and moss
cover the rock; a few columbine
in the cracks. A pileated calls
from behind; redstarts and vireos chatter
below. Warm northern sun slices
the tops of the canopy and glistens
on the sea. I don't know
if there's more good in the world
than bad. I wish I could say.
But what I do know sitting here:
the good we do in your name;
the rest we do all in our own.

Glenn Freeman