

Campfire in August

Rowena T. Torrevillas

Over the years, we have set up camp across the country, overlooking lakes or bodies of water large and small: Lake Thompson in the silvery winter fastnesses of South Dakota; Mary's Lake by Estes Park in Colorado, Santa Rosa in a moonlit field in New Mexico; Lake of the Ozarks in the spring rain; North Fork, Wyoming; even the water meadows by the Atlantic in Connecticut where, unknown to us, the tide rose at midnight and almost lifted the tent from the meadow onto the beach and into the ocean, as seawater rose all around us. (The following morning, the college kids in the site next to ours said blithely, "We thot yew kneewoo...").

What we didn't know was that the most satisfying of the campfires would be ten minutes away from our house, at Coralville Lake. A campfire satisfies the elsewhere-ness that is our lives' endemic condition, granting us the simultaneity of being both outdoors and in.

Everywhere we've gone, tent camping, by sedan or van, and now in the Winnebago, we've observed—learned, and lived by—the unspoken etiquette of the road: don't ask the names of your fellow travelers. Share the embers from your fire with anyone in need of light, offer a jump-start, or exchange cordial observations about the driftwood that's lying on the sandbar on the riverbank and looking like a supine giant...

But respect the illusion of invisibility that motivates all our wanderings: we seek the forests, the lakeside, the seemingly endless ribbon of highway because we want to be, essentially, alone under the night sky, the

stars wheeling high overhead. The harp music rising from the next campfire and filling the Grand Canyon's north rim—that is a gift, the supreme grace unasked. We will never know their names, but we carry the imprint of their fleeting presence with us always.

Now it is sunset, and as the dusk sends long shadows across the green and gold on the grass, a herd of deer comes silently out of the woods across us: one, then three, then there are seven—a yearling, a stag, several does. They start drinking at the water's edge.

Lem builds the fire, and I—feeling invincible in the jeans I've changed into to frustrate the bugs and gnats buzzing at my shins—I look around at the other campsites, where fires are also starting to replace the afterglow, establishing the primal sense of shelter offered by the sight of these controlled tongues of flame licking and dancing sinuously before us.

The little boys of summer, who like us are wishing the hour would go on and summer stretch onward endlessly, are running through the tall grass until their mother calls them into their camper van: time for bed.

To the east, the moon is starting to rise: it's grown past half-moon, not quite three quarters. High overhead, there's only one star as yet, shining over this clearing in the woods. "It's saying 'Make all your wishes; I'll be here for a long time yet,'" Lem says, and he stands to add another couple of thick neatly-sawn and seasoned logs to the fire.

The wind off the lake is cool against my arms. Around us the wisps of smoke from other fire-rings in this federally-run campground lend us a comforting sense of human solidarity—no bears to come charging red-eyed and salivating into our midst, as the kids toast S'mores on the last campfire before school starts in two weeks. It is all tame and manageable, these outdoors, so we start thinking of the gypsies, making their nomadic trek from India and what we think of now as Egypt (where they got their generic name, after all): tinkers and horse-traders and plaintive untrained musicians, wandering up toward central Europe: a trail of language and romance.

Lem starts to wonder aloud about how basic hygiene was possible in those brightly-painted caravans. "In the bushes," he decides. And we're off and running on a mildly hysterical riff: the dark-eyed Gypsy maiden, stricken with constipation or diarrhea, hurrying off into the copse of trees, lifting her bright Gujarati skirt with its tiers of brazenly-hued ruffles, while

in the too-near distance the tambourines hiss and clatter, to cover the embarrassment of the most fundamental of bodily noises she's trying not to emit as she squats in the hedges doing her business.

Here in our campsite in Coralville, Iowa—ten minutes from our house—the crickets are populating the twilight expanse with their chirring; an owl hoots, and among the trees by the water's edge, there's a resonant rhythm building up that's not unlike the call of waterfowl: a tree frog, it must be. I don't know its name, or what it would be. But its sound is comforting, almost like a blanket thrown around us and all the living creatures, sentient or vegetal, in this serene place under the stars.

In the home across the world where I'd lived as a child and young adult, my father had built two ponds with his own hands. Singing frogs lived among the lotus pads, while farther down the dirt road leading to the beach, the sea-waves on the coral shoals washed their counterpoint to the frogs and cicadas and the trickle from the fountain on our lawn. *There, here.* The moon rose—*then, now*—casting ripples across space and making the world—water, leaves, tiny wings susurrating in trees, stray wind from the mountain range—all, seem safe and enfolding. And offering hope that the season, high summer, would be there for ever. **

MacBride Woods in Autumn

October 8

The wind rushing through the treetops on the hillside at MacBride sounds like a distant sea.

The woods are just starting to reach their peak of color, autumn on the cusp of full ripeness. The tree across this tent is extravagantly gold, with some pale green among the orange and yellow just to remind the eye where all the wealth came from. The evergreens set off the transient glory.

Green and gold, like some galleon old/
Maple leaf, now set thy sail/
Out of every autumn gale,
Drifting down the breezes...my mother used to sing to me, and then to my daughter. I had forgotten I knew the words to that song until she started singing it again to my baby daughter. Given just a little more time, she would have sung it to her great-grandson too.

Last night the moonlight streamed through the forest, a brightness that was enchantment: misty silver Camelot; one could see the young knight striding lightly among tall tree trunks, his shock of thick wheat-colored hair turned silver in the moon-dappled light.

My own knight, his short-cropped hair sprinkled with silver, rises from the camp chair to set another weather-seasoned chunk of firewood on the campfire. The stars fill the sky as they only did in my childhood across the world.

The dining tent, set up beside our white-and-blue Winnebago Le-Sharo, looks like Camelot, with the netting at either entrance held open like arched curtains. Hemingway would also have been pleased.



▲ Me & Mom at Forest Camp

This morning the bumblebees and late butterflies alight on the asters and baby's-breath growing wild at the edge of our campsite: a posy ready-made, planted there with Nature's random yet somehow deliberate esthetic, a generosity that I feel suddenly undeserving of. A spider-web strung across the entrance to the path through the woods and down to the lake (a flash of water through the trees): it catches the light and. . .my heart?—the metaphor's far too facile, but I let it go. The bumblebee is too heavy for the aster, which bends under its passing weight, so it moves on having milked the flower of its nectar.

Another brief wave, as wind rustles through the trees. A red-and-gold leaf sails from the woods across to where I'm sitting, settles on me, right over my heart. I hear my Mom saying, *Wena. Be happy.*

It's been two months since I last heard my mother's voice. But on a day like this, I cannot be anything except happy. **

Proserpina's Song

Not-quite spring. In a week, when we return to the woods over Lake MacBride, I'll write a springtime essay to round out this cycle. But today is Saint Patrick's Day ("the wearing o' the green"), and it's three days short of the vernal equinox, so I can't yet write truthfully in the spirit of e.e. cummings, as in the poem about childhood and the beginnings of the awareness of mortality, "in Just-/spring." But I will, as soon as springtime arrives.

Today it's 80°F, and it feels like early summer. We've skipped spring altogether, while the calendar tells us it's still winter. Record-breaking highs...or something's broken and though Nature has put on a smiling face, I think the earth is trying to tell us something and the wayward children aren't paying attention. Men gave names to the stars and assigned hours to the day, so we don't know how to listen when things such as seasons go out of whack.

Last night, the planets Jupiter and Venus were aligned, as they have been for some weeks now, in the Western sky...the first of the celestial lights to turn on as we sat in the afterglow. We sat by the fire-ring, where flames leaped up from the windfall branches foraged from the grass at the edge of the campsite, the waters gleaming darkly through the trunks of the still-leafless trees in these woods. "Whose woods these are" belong to us, the taxpayers whose pittance—a dollar on our annual income-tax forms, what we check off each April—support the many moments we've spent at this very spot, of late: we have arrived at that elusive moment we come here seeking.

The sky is filled with stars whose clarity make one think there must be a bright room out there, and our sky—the firmament—is merely a curtain, a blanket draped around our mortal circumstances, through which illuminations into the celestial randomly gleam. Oh, God, make small/ That old star-eaten blanket of the sky,/ That I may fold it round me and in comfort lie. Thus wrote the British poet T.E. Hulme; a half-remembered snatch of verse, a passage on Imagism from the textbook my mother had written long ago: a line whose meaning—as with all inherited wisdom—I only now think I fully understand, because I am experiencing it.

In the morning, sitting by the smoldering remains of last night's campfire and sharing Lem's cup of coffee, we are seeing the flash of young men, the early sun glittering off their still-winter white shoulders, running at the bottom of the hill ... along the lake banks, following the woodland trail around the bend of the inlet, and up across the opposite shore. As they run past the bluff, their shadows keep pace with them; where they had been running in twos, there are now four figures running along the road.

These runners, passing below the trees in groups of two or three, must be the Solon High School cross-country team, doing a training run on this sunny Saturday morning. The Spartans, they call themselves; and I think how right it is, enacting millennia later the legend that gave rise to the athletic event of modern times, the marathon. Do they think about that first occurrence from which this morning's exertions originated?—how the runner during the Greco-Persian wars was sent from Marathon to Athens with the news that the Athenian forces had won ... only to collapse after he burst into the agora, shouting “Νενικήκαμεν” (Nenikékamen, ‘We have won.’). The runner reaching the end of the race, his own heart giving out as he relayed his message on the Battle of Marathon, one day in August or September 490 years before Christ was born. Herodotus gives an alternative account: that during the Greco-Persian wars, the messenger Pheidippides or Philippides ran from Athens to Sparta asking for help, and then ran back, a distance of 240 kilometers each way.

Whether it was from Marathon to Athens, or Athens to Sparta, the young men of Solon, a small town in the middle of a continent two millennia away, are celebrating that heroic moment in the shining glow of their shoulders, glinting through the trees, along the shores of the lake in the midmorning sun and in the early springtime of their as-yet unwearied day.

In the cove below, a woman is unmooring her boat, ready to show her little daughter how to cast for fish. In a minute or two, it's there: a small white boat in the deeper reaches of the lake.

BY the flickering of the campfire, I look down at my feet. The shoes I am wearing are my favorite Bass walking shoes—pale denim clogs with leather edging and rubber soles, a gift from my daughter several Christmases ago. I have seen a photo of Brad Pitt wearing similar shoes while vacationing with Angelina Jolie in Cambodia or Capri—who in heck cares where Brangelina are, anyway? ...but knowing that Brad Pitt wears similar shoes makes up for the fact that now I do not wear dress pumps whenever I travel overseas. I have promised my daughter I'd wear those sensible shoes, so she'll be assured I won't stumble and fall during one of the trips I take alone. As though entering a holy place, we remove our shoes when we go through that final security checkpoint just before boarding the aircraft; because Brad Pitt wears them too, I am now not embarrassed to see my denim clogs in the plastic basket riding down the conveyor, on their way toward being reunited with my feet.

Those shoes have crossed more miles than I can keep track of, particularly this past long year: conferences, workshops, visits home to see my mother.

Next month, I will be making that trip across the world—a continent and an ocean away from these woods in not-quite-spring, where the undergrowth is only now starting to show the first sturdy greenness of a new season. The first of these essays, notes about our campfire forays into the woods above Lake MacBride, was dated August 11 last year: ten days before we got word that my mother was gone. Gone where? —past that “old star-eaten blanket of sky” that wraps around me? This will be the first trip—after that longest and most numb of voyages, to lay her to rest—that I will be making, where I will arrive with no mother to welcome me home.

This past year, as I have written elsewhere, I've sometimes felt like a small child wandering around in a forest and waiting for a grownup to show me the way home; looking back at the cycle of meditations I've written at Lake MacBride, I realize they've all been, in a way, about looking for my mother. It's a reversal of the ancient legend: how Ceres, the earth mother, searched the world and went down to hell to rescue her daughter Proser-

pina. She crossed the river Styx and bargained with the god of the dark world, so she could bring her daughter back out into the light. Because the daughter had eaten three seeds of the pomegranate fruit while she had been held captive in Hades, as part of the bargain to get her



Photo taken by LMT, Sunday morning, 6/10/12.
Lake MacBride state park

daughter back, the Earth Mother had to return Proserpina to the regions of the dead for three months each year. The mother only got her daughter back into the land of the living after the cold months when nothing grew as the mother mourned. Thus was the springtime born.

New leaves, green under the dry brownness underfoot, are springing up in this tree-clad hillside above Lake MacBride, halfway around the Earth from where I was born. I am on my way there, Mom, arriving on your birthday. I'll put flowers on that grassy spot where we laid you to rest: a brown ugly gash in the earth seven months ago and now blanketed in green. But that wasn't you, not you any longer; you were never there in that place, as you are not there now. I find you everywhere.

Facebook post on June 10, 2012