

Wilderness House Literary Review 8/2

Michael Gillan Maxwell
In Summer

I. Waterloo, Iowa

Towering clouds take me back to that summer. Endless days of blazing heat and claustrophobic humidity, colossal skies over relentless rows of corn and the ecstatic cacophony of crickets at twilight. Staccato bursts of heat lightning flash across muscular thunderheads piled up on the purple horizon. I catch glow worms in the cerulean dusk and keep them in my bedroom in a jar with holes poked through the lid. There's a tornado warning. The air is charged with electric apprehension and my parents sit in the dark out on the front porch smoking cigarettes and talking quietly. Something about the polio epidemic and the neighbor girl in an iron lung.

II. Door County, Wisconsin

We climb the spiral staircase to the top of the old tower. The view sweeps to the horizon in every direction. The leaden, gray lake bristles with whitecaps and thunderous waves hammer slippery boulders on Death's Door. My mother tells the story of a battle between two tribes. Canoes capsize in the surf and warriors drown in the maelstrom, their bodies dashed against the rocks. Sighing wind and roaring surf swell to a furious din and there's surging water as far as we can see. We turn for the stairs; the way back down, impossibly steep, the descent ominous.

III. Upper Peninsula, Michigan

We turn off the two-lane just past Lonesome Pine and drive down the narrow, twisting path, which is overgrown and rutted. Branches whip the sides of the station wagon as we creep along and in some places deadfall blocks the way altogether. The preacher's cabin is halfway around the lake. It's always deserted and there's never a sign of life. A green wooden rowboat lies submerged to the gunnels next to a rotting dock. The fecund smell of decay from the soft muck on the boggy shoreline mixes with the sweet ambrosia of water lilies. Frogs plop into the water from lily pads and snapping turtles breach the surface. Sometimes, after dinner, we all pile into the car and go to the dump to watch the bears forage through the trash. At night, Jack lights the smelly, kerosene lanterns that fill the cabin with a cozy, yellow glow, but a trip to the outhouse after dark is full of terrors in the long shadows cast by flashlight. On nights when it's too hot to sleep up in the loft, I lie out on the screen porch listening to the unearthly sound of the loons as they call to each other across the dark, still water.