

Northern Lakes'

Soundings

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a gathering of stories, poems and essays
from northern Wisconsin

January, 2010



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from Webster's Dictionary:

¹sounding n 1a: measurement by sounding b: the depth so ascertained c pl: a place or part of a body of water where a hand sounding line will reach bottom 2: measurement of atmospheric conditions at various heights 3: a probe, test, or sampling of opinion or intention

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Writing Poems

by LaMoine MacLaughlin

Good morning, everyone!

This morning we will be doing something different.

I want you to listen carefully,

and I want you to take careful notes

so that you will be able to do well on the quiz

at the end of the period.

I want you to take a piece of paper

and I want you to place that piece of paper

on your table before you.

I want you to arrange your paper so that it is straight,

so you can see it easily,

and so that it lies pleasantly beneath your touch.

I want you to carefully flatten out all creases

on the surface of your paper

and unroll all wrinkled edges

(do you feel how smooth it is?),

and I want you to look intently upon your paper.

I want you to reach out next and take your pen in hand,

I want you to hold your pen comfortably,

and I want you to concentrate upon your pen.

I want you to take your pen

and I want you to turn the tip of your pen into a scoop.

I want the tip of your pen to transform into a shovel.

I want you to take the shovel your pen has become

and I want you to sink the point of the spade

into your mind.

I want you to use it to cut into the cavern

of your subconscious.

I want you to dig deep down
into the secret corners of your soul,
into those shadowed recesses you hardly ever visit,
those places no one knows about but you.

I want you to search the smelly muck and mildew
of your memory, and with your shovel
turn the soil of your imagination, breaking the clods
of long forgotten fantasies and dreams.

I want you to take the shovel of your pen and scoop
some gloop up from your soul and plop it here
upon your paper.

I want you to take this formless mass of memory and
dreams and work it with the shovel of your pen.

Mold this amorphous sludge into some shape:
knock off the jagged edges, round all rough spots
smooth, and let it spin out into swirls.

Forge it into a rhododendron or a wisp of smoke.

Let it explode into a cannon or a truck,
or toss it forth in flight, a lyric, sweetly singing bird
whose mystic voice fills all the corners
of this morning's dawning light.

Craft it into
a poem.

**A Villanelle For Those
Who Don't Like Poetry**

by Louie MacLaughlin

Here—read this poem! Try not to rebel!
Bear with me in this effort to explain
My new obsession with the villanelle.

I never liked the genre very well,
But didn't feel for poets much disdain.
Against their poems, though, I did rebel.

Free verse especially did not compel
A second reading—somewhat of a strain.
That's why I now prefer the villanelle.

The rhythms and the rhymes in part propel
The villanelle, the music must remain.
(Just two more stanzas—don't rush to rebel.)

Try writing one and feel its magic spell:
The complex puzzle which it will contain.
You'll see why I prefer the villanelle.

You must think—will this ever end? Don't yell!
Forgive this weak attempt to entertain.
Congratulations! You did not rebel!
Was that so bad? You read a villanelle!

The View From Windy Hill—On the Road

by Edward M. Moersfelder

A Villanelle For Waxwings

by Louie MacLaughlin

With old man winter they've begun their race
To warmer havens, eager to unwind.
Today they swarm the flowering crab with grace.

Their sleek black masks attempt to self-efface,
Creating beauty even more refined,
But no escape from winter's frigid race.

Its heavy branches, full of fruit, encase
A treat for gray squirrels frolicking behind
The flowering crab tree full of waxwings' grace.

This gathering of strength quickens the pace
Of birds in flight—their journey must remind
Us winter has begun its frigid race.

Tomorrow new horizons they'll embrace,
But will they keep this forlorn tree in mind?
The one they left abandoned, stripped of grace?

As cedar waxwings plan next winter's chase,
En route to this crab tree they'll be entwined
With victory in yet another race.
Until then only squirrels give this tree grace.

Although I am a hunter, I say a quiet “thank you” when dusk closes in on the receding thunder of the last shot of deer rifle season. For nine days the deer have been under continual assault, driven from their coverts, chased under fire across open fields, tracked and killed. On the self-imposed Thanksgiving ceasefire at Windy Hill we watched quietly from the living room as first a doe and two fawns, then a single buck, then a buck and a doe came down the hill from the north. They had been pushed out from their resting place and were on full alert. They were indecisive about whether to head into the woods, vanish in the swamp or continue cross country. For twenty minutes we watched a ballet of deer survival as they moved, hesitated, retreated, trotted up the ravine, then down, and finally dissolved into the woods and marsh. Balanchine could not have choreographed it better. It was the highlight of deer season.

But the killing did not begin on November 21st. Three weeks before, as I pulled out of our driveway, I saw a young buck lying on our mowed walking path 50 yards from the road. It had been hit by a car and struggled to, and died, where I saw it. A year earlier I had found another deer with broken legs dead in the marsh below the house. Two years before that, the skid marks and broken grille plastic told a similar story in front of the driveway to the old homestead below Windy Hill. During the rut, a deer's mind turns from caution and the carnage begins. On a recent October trip from Madison, a friend reported 13 fresh kills on the road. And that is only the deer.

It is impossible to drive and not hit animals on the road. I knew Karel had been adequately acclimated to country living when the phone rang at 7 o'clock one morning. It was my neighbor who said he had hit a pheasant about two miles south, did not have time to stop, and was pretty sure it was not in real bad shape. I hung up the phone and headed toward the door. Karel asked

where I was going and I replied to pick up a road kill pheasant for supper. "O.K.," she said, and went back to reading the paper. I knew I had been adequately acclimated to country living when, four minutes later, I came over the small rise to where the pheasant was supposed to be and saw a beat-up old pickup leaving the scene. No pheasant. In retrospect it occurred to me that the occupant of that beater may have saved me from some difficult explaining, given that it was not pheasant season and apparently, from the scattered feathers, it was a hen pheasant.

I have not yet hit a deer, but that is only good luck. Squirrels dart out from oak woods, deking like point guards, before making the decision to go or not to go. Horned larks picking gravel in flocks by the side of the road in January fly up and miss the gust of wind that would have carried them safely past the left headlight. On a trip back from Montana on highway 200 through wide open country several years ago, I encountered prairie dogs running onto the road in such numbers that it was impossible to miss them all. The blacktop was littered with carcasses and joy went out of the trip. When the first Fords began moving on country roads, the red-headed woodpeckers that lived in holes in untreated light poles swooped down as the cars startled them and collided with the cars. Genetic adaptation has not occurred quickly enough for wild animals to cope with the automobile. They die in great numbers.

Yet the inevitable conflict with civilization does not explain it all. Wallace Stegner was troubled by the number of dead animals on the road down from his foothills home in California. It was not accidental, he thought, that so many animals were killed on that low speed back road. He had lived there for some time and not hit any. He surmised a darker human element that explained the crushed bodies. On the town road below Windy Hill I find evidence of that same dark force. While I can understand a deer springing from the side of the road to an unavoidable impact with a car, I cannot understand the presence, one early June day, of a washbasin sized snapping turtle dead upon the road. Or a beaver.

These animals do not dart, rush or run. They lumber, crawl and amble. They are victims of a perverse sense of road play and it is profoundly sad. I suspect that the same mentality that caused some "sportsman" this past deer season to leave the cleaned skeleton of a deer at the side of the road beneath a 25 mile-per-hour sign on which he had hung the head and neck of the deer, its tagged ear cut off, causes people to swerve to hit turtles, opossums and raccoons.

Barry Lopez is the author of many books about the natural world, including his beautiful description of the far north, *Arctic Dreams*. In his 23 page work *Apologia* Lopez describes stopping his car as he comes upon animals on the road, picking them up and putting them off to the side. "I carry each one away from the tarmac into a cover of grass or brush out of decency, I think. And worry. Who are these animals, their lights gone out? What journeys have fallen apart here?" It is the same sensibility expressed by Aldo Leopold in a different context in his essay "Thinking like a Mountain" as he watched a wolf he had shot die: "We reached the old wolf in time to watch a fierce green fire dying in her eyes. I realized then, have known ever since, that there was something new to me in those eyes—something known only to her and to the mountain."

For me, stewardship of our natural resources is respect for our natural resources, whether it is our farmland, our garden, our favorite burr oak woods, or the critters that wait at the side of the road. Color me old-fashioned and sentimental, but the older I get, the more I feel some kinship with the living creatures that share the glacial landscape of Windy Hill. Whether we are in a deer stand at the edge of the cornfield or behind the wheel of our car, in the end, stewardship and ethics merge. The simple matter of how we treat our furred, feathered, scaled and shelled co-travelers may, in the long run, determine whether our genetic adaptation will occur quickly enough for us to save ourselves.

An Exhortation

by Ralph Weber

We groan beneath the times and would give birth
To secret life sustained with secret dreams,
We fix instead on things of little worth.

Benighted in our crimes we can't go forth
And hear within the womb the sobs and screams.
We groan beneath the times and would give birth.

Reflection, honor, holiness and truth
Have given way to safety, sloth and schemes.
We fix instead on things of little worth.

We party, shop and play with tawdry mirth
And trade the sea for narrow, shallow streams.
We groan beneath the times and would give birth.

We would own all and do with greater girth
Why can't we see the embryonic gleams?
We fix instead on things of little worth.

Let's bring to term this savior of the earth,
Let's speak of virtues no one now esteems.
We groan beneath the times and would give birth.
We fix instead on things of little worth.

To My Sister, Mona

by Ralph Weber

I want to impress her because she loves me
and secretly admires me.
I will know the names of the wildflowers
That I see on my walks every morning in the village,
So that I will be able to tell them casually
and knowingly when she comes to visit,
And when we go for a walk up Golf Drive
or past some farms on the highway.
I will know the names of the butterflies,
And I will know too the names of the stars and constellations
Like *Arcturus* and *Corona Borealis*,
And their names will trip off my tongue.
I will impress her with common sulfur and swallowtail.
I will impress her with evening primrose and fleabane.
She would pass through the family grapevine
her heightened admiration and wonder of me,
And perhaps the others would follow: Michael and Alfred
and David and Barbara.
She will continue to love me secretly and in her simple way,
Passing on like cool and scented water my praises.
When she visits we will walk along the highway
on a cool late afternoon.
I will say, "Mind the old field clover,"
or "You're crushing a wild morning-glory."
I will say, "Do you like better the cabbage butterfly
or the checkerspot?"
I will say, "The moon seen in the daytime
is called the *Children's Moon*."
I will say, "Six weeks after the flowering goldenrod
comes the first frost."
And there will be nothing left but the spirit of desolate places,
The indwelling of perfumes from a vast and perfect desert.

Of Mist & Mystery—A Morning Paddle

by Tom Lindfors

It's 6:30 a.m., cool and clear. Mist dances upon the lake as though alive. My bow is frosted with dew, the paddle is cold in my hands; it's a perfect morning to paddle.

The beauty of a kayak lies in its lack of presence, the subtleness of its intrusion. As I settle into the cockpit, the residents, winged and otherwise, are already whispering. Beads of dew roll off my bow as I glide away from shore, a silent wake, my only trail, as I slip into the mist. Light scatters, trapped between air and water; my paddle parts both. Tall trees shadow my sojourn. Energy flows freely, hip to hand to paddle, a single fluid motion...perfect rhythm.

To the west, my guide, an ancient white pine, stands alone above the mist guarding storied stones marking those long departed. I find myself in the company of spirits, some I know, some I do not. This morning they are particularly palpable, tangible in the dense morning air. I am comforted by their presence. I don't so much breathe, as absorb. Listen. The difference between what I know and what I believe is joined here.

It is rare when sky and water are so closely met, identical twins the mirror reflects. They invite me to race through their embrace. Turtles peek and frogs spy. A pair of swans glide in and out of the mist on the island side, wary but not frightened. A second pair joins on my starboard side; not more than fifteen feet the misty crease. Overhead a red-tailed hawk calls. To whom, I cannot see. Perhaps, it is to me. In the shadows, the cool air clings to me. Reality is elusive in the mist. I hear many voices, but feel a single heartbeat. Without resistance the kayak flies, my perfect means to an end. Far ahead, the mist retreats, afraid of heaven's heat.

I concentrate on the pine, on the line. My senses are heightened in the maze. Super-tuned, I slide through fragrant pockets of pine stirred by an early bloom. The water, newly liquid, barely

hides lily pads new to the light. Sounds surround, foreign and familiar. Four legged, feathered, leaved, and webbed, they find me not friend or foe, just a traveler passing through.

When spirit and soul align, time stands still. On those rare occasions, for just an instant, I sense how it all fits together. I experience, a moment of clarity, a vision...faith. In that moment, I know in my soul there is meaning, something after this, a next, a reunion, a reason. Every living thing around me confirms this. The revelation is so short, so sudden, so sure, my heart stops, there is no air! I am connected to something deep within. It's primal, previous to us, reaching over time, past ages and places I've never known, to a greater consciousness, a river alive with familiarity, family and friends, a community where past, present and future are one. From so little, I receive so much...peace.

From dark to light, the angle of the sun, ever increasing, eats up mirror and mist alike. Now the pine looms tall before me. My pace quickens, strong, my pulse pounds, with each stroke quick and true, the hull bolts forward, sleek in the sun, fast with desire, wind whistling, leaving mist and mystery behind...hip to hip, hand to hand, push, pull, glide...perfect rhythm.

The Little Donkey

By D.C.T. Hoffman

Scene 1. Inside a very old building in Jerusalem. It is the dealership of Jacob Zack, dealer in pack and transportation animals. Old Jacob sits at his desk tallying receipts as his young grandchild approaches with a feed container.

Jacob: Did you feed and bed the animals as I told you to?

Grandchild: Yes, Grandfather, just as you told me to. Grandfather, my friend is here. He helped me. Can you tell him about the little donkeys in our stables with the cross on their forehead?

Jacob: Why don't you tell him? You have heard the story many times.

Grandchild: Yes, I know the story well, Grandfather, but you can tell it better. And I don't think he would believe me.

Jacob: All right then, I will tell you the story. We have to go back two thousand years ago in this very same building and the very same stables where our ancestor had this very same business.... (Lights dim.)

Scene 2. Same place two thousand years earlier. A dealer sits at the desk tallying receipts, another man enters. His name is Joseph.

Joseph: Excuse me, sir, my name is Joseph. I saw your sign outside and I have come to buy a donkey from you. My wife is with child and we must travel to Bethlehem to register. I don't have much money, so I can only afford your poorest animal. (Holds out a few coins.)

Dealer: You can't buy much with that.

Joseph: I'm sorry but it's all I have. Any animal will have to do.

Dealer: Well, I have one donkey in the stable that could be the one for you. She is scrawny and pretty much useless. She just takes up room, I was going to sell her for glue

but you can have her. She is the small skinny one with the white spot on her forehead in the end stall. Take her away, Joseph. (Dealer goes back to tallying. Joseph exits and reenters with his pregnant wife.)

Mary: I must thank you for the donkey. She is very friendly, almost as if she knows us. She will take us to Bethlehem. (Exit. Lights dim.)

Scene 3. Same place two years later. Joseph once again enters.

Joseph: Good morning. I'm not sure you remember me, but two years ago you gave me a scrawny donkey that you didn't want. My wife and I traveled to Bethlehem to register for the census, and there she gave birth to a beautiful baby boy. We have now returned to Jerusalem from Egypt where we had to go because of Herod's threat to kill our little son. The little donkey carried my wife faithfully through all of our travels, but now we have no further need of her and I am returning her to you with our gratitude for your kindness.

Dealer: Yes, I remember you, but mostly I remember that scrawny donkey as being of no use to me. I kept her too long as it was. I'm surprised that she even survived much less carry anyone anywhere. I don't know what I will do with her, but I'll take a look to see if she will be good for glue. (Exits and then returns with a look of amazement.) I would not have believed it, if I hadn't seen it with my own eyes. I was not sure that this was the same donkey, but it had my stable's brand and ear notches. But I don't understand. The small white spot on her forehead is now a white star, and she is in such good condition that I can keep her for a brood mare.

Joseph: Please take good care of her, and thank you again, sir. (Exits. Lights dim.)

Scene 4. Thirty-one years later. Dealer, now older, tallying at desk. A woman, also older, enters.

Older Woman (Mary): Many years ago, my husband came to you for a donkey to carry me to Bethlehem and you kindly gave him one for which we were very grateful. You may remember that she had a white star on her forehead. My husband returned the donkey to you two years later, and he told me then that you were going to use her as a brood mare. If you have one of her colts, I would like to buy it for my son to ride when he enters Jerusalem tomorrow.

Dealer: Yes, I remember. I have the very same donkey that you used thirty-one years ago and she appears not to have aged a day since then. You may take her and bring her back afterward.

Mary: Thank you. I will have my son return her to you tomorrow. (Exits. Lights dim.)

Scene 5. Six days later. Dealer at desk. Mary enters, tearfully.

Mary: I am sorry that I could not have my son return the donkey six days ago, as I promised, but he was arrested, tried and crucified. Another Mary and I put my son's body on the donkey's back and it carried him to his tomb yesterday. I am returning the donkey to you as she was, except that where the star was on her forehead, there is now a white cross. Please treat her kindly for all that she has done for us. (Exits. Lights dim.)

Scene 6. Same as scene 1.

Grandchild: I love that story, Grandfather. And it's true isn't it?

Grandfather: It is true, and it explains why all of our donkeys have a white cross on their forehead.

(The End.)

The Writers

LaMoine MacLaughlin is editor of Northern Lakes' *Soundings* and is first Poet Laureate of Amery, Wisconsin. He lives in rural Clayton.

Louie MacLaughlin appears here for the first time in Northern Lakes' *Soundings*. She lives in rural Amery.

Edward M. Moersfelder has appeared in Northern Lakes' *Soundings* before. He lives in rural Amery.

Ralph Weber has published poems in recent issues of Northern Lakes' *Soundings*. He lives in Clear Lake.

Tom Lindfors appears here for the first time in Northern Lakes' *Soundings*. He lives in Star Prairie.

D.C.T. Hoffman has appeared before in Northern Lakes' *Soundings*. He lives in rural Amery.

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