

11-15-2023

Evening Journeys

Erna Buffie

no university affiliation

Follow this and additional works at / Suivez-nous ainsi que d'autres travaux et œuvres:

<https://scholars.wlu.ca/thegoose>

Recommended Citation / Citation recommandée

Buffie, Erna. "Evening Journeys." *The Goose*, vol. 20, no. 1, article 23, 2023,

<https://scholars.wlu.ca/thegoose/vol20/iss1/23>.

This article is brought to you for free and open access by Scholars Commons @ Laurier. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Goose by an authorized editor of Scholars Commons @ Laurier. For more information, please contact scholarscommons@wlu.ca.

Cet article vous est accessible gratuitement et en libre accès grâce à Scholars Commons @ Laurier. Le texte a été approuvé pour faire partie intégrante de la revue The Goose par un rédacteur autorisé de Scholars Commons @ Laurier. Pour de plus amples informations, contactez scholarscommons@wlu.ca.

ERNA BUFFIE

Evening Journeys

It's hard for me to remain still on a backless canoe seat, ankles crossed, knees splayed to maintain an easy balance. I have fibromyalgia and tonight my joints are on fire, and my hands are stiff and sore. I lift one knee up and stretch out the other leg, which brings temporary relief. The canoe starts to drift, and I can hear the rumble of a submerged log under the hull.

Something emerges out of the water in front of me—the back of a tiny head. It circles toward me just as I lift my paddle into the canoe and reach for my camera. The beaver kit hears me and makes a sharp turn away, its tiny tail flipping up and hitting the water with a barely audible slap, possibly the first danger warning it has issued in its young life.

The effort makes me smile. I forget the pain, remain still, and wait to see if the kit reappears.

On land, I'm always alert to danger. Out here on the water I feel safe, unreachable by bears, wolves and humans. When moving on land, I also tend toward impatience: nothing happens smoothly or quickly enough. Here, all movement seems graceful, tonight particularly so, with no wind to fight, no bugs biting at my ankles, nowhere in particular to be or to go. If not for the pain that yells at me to keep moving, I feel that I could sit here for hours just waiting and watching.

When I was a child, coming to the lake was like travelling from one century into another, from a world that was gassed and electrified, to a world where glass oil lamps were lit with matches, water drawn from the lake and perishables stored in an ice box or deep in a sealed hole in the ground. Now we have all the mod cons, electric stoves and fridges, heat and lights at the flip of a switch. But on my evening journeys, time once again moves backward, and the world slows to an ancient rhythmic pace.

I can hear something, but I can't place it. At first I think it might be animals, possibly deer rustling through the bush as they graze. Within minutes, it builds into a pulsing, shushing sound like hundreds of pantlegs swishing through whisker grass or distant rain steadily approaching through the trees. I look up, and there's a thunderhead moving in. The sky, once a soft greyish white, is now a deep blue-black, the setting sun a slash of orange in dense smoky grey. The shushing wind finally breaks through the trees and hits the water.

"Time to race the storm," the canoe says as the wind catches her bow and spins me homeward.

*

I've never considered myself a misanthrope, but I seem to transform into one on weekends at the lake. Don't get me wrong; I don't mind water skiers or kids that go tubing, but I hiss expletives at teens wheeling around in massive wake boats that destroy the shoreline and drown the loon nests; heap scorn on floating barges filled with loud, generally drunk retirees; and rail at grown men on four wheelers who tear through the bush off trail, grinding up lichen and reindeer moss that takes a hundred years to grow. To me, they're emblematic of everything that's wrong with our species: beer cans and Styrofoam floating in the water, gas fumes adding to the climatic burden, people blind to the natural world that surrounds them.

"But they're just having fun," my nephew says.

"They're assholes," I respond. "And they can all fuck off."

He stares at me as if contemplating who the real asshole is. I smile sweetly, turn away, and head back to my quiet cottage.

*

It's Monday, the weekenders have left, and the world is blissfully quiet, at least for a little while. I've just headed out in the canoe for my nightly paddle when out of nowhere, two men on a barge come wheeling into the bay. I wait as they motor down the far shore and disappear into the marsh.

Well, I think, they won't last long there, unless they want their prop twisted into a standstill by lily pads and weeds.

Sure enough, as I angle the canoe through the submerged rocks between the island and the point of land at the edge of our property, they wheel the barge out of the marsh and aim it in my direction. I ignore them, focusing instead on a ghost tree that lays half in and half out of the water. It's an old spruce that probably died years, possibly decades ago but remained standing until a strong wind finally toppled it, its narrow body and spindly branches now as silvery grey as the granite stones that surround it.

I can hear a motor running, so I turn to look, and there are the barge boys trying to angle their pontoon boat through the shallow rocky passage I've just paddled through. *They have to be day trippers*, I think, then shout at them that there are too many rocks, and they'll founder or worse, break a shear pin if they try to pass through the channel. They wave as if they've heard, but keep trying.

I'm halfway down the shore when I finally hear them hit reverse and motor out of the bay.

It takes years to learn how to navigate a lake. I was ahead of the game as a kid because my mother started coming down here with her parents in 1919, so she knew the lake and its danger spots—the hidden underwater ridges, the sudden rocky shallows that can kill a boat motor—and she imparted that knowledge to her daughters.

Regardless of that, I still manage to get the canoe hung up on submerged rocks when I fail to pay attention, intent on photographing something new on the shoreline—a particularly fecund tree stump or a plant I've never seen before. The telltale scraping sound always makes me wince as I imagine yet another white scar slashed across the hull's green paint. I spend the next five minutes trying to lean my weight further into the stern, until the canoe floats free of the boulder's clutches.

Despite the occasional confrontation with immovable objects, I love everything about moving through water in a canoe, in part because I love how my body seems to merge with the boat's weight and form, finding the balance required to keep it upright and afloat. I love the way a well-designed paddle slices into the water and flips into a steering rudder at the flick of a wrist, and how strong and efficient my movements need to be to keep it on course in a strong wind. But what I love most is how silently it glides through the water.

*

The smoke from distant forest fires is so thick that I'm trapped inside the cabin for days. Northern Canada is ablaze, but news reports rarely reference the link between more frequent and intense wildfires and climate change. Tonight, as I ease my achy body into the canoe, I wonder why that is. Does linking fire and climate require too much explanation? Do reporters still feel they have to prove the link before they can mention it, when all the evidence they need is currently blazing through millions of hectares?

I look up at the forest that surrounds me and wonder when it, too, will burn.

I know that boreal trees need to burn. In fact, trees like the black spruce with its crown of heat-triggered seed cones and dry, needle-less bottom branches are born to burn and have evolved to direct the fire up off the forest floor. So the fact that they're falling to wildfires isn't the problem. The problem is, fueled by repeated years of unusually warm, dry weather, the fires are becoming so big and so intense that they ravage not only the trees but the forest floor and its seed bank. Some areas are burning repeatedly even before new growth can take hold.

The canoe drifts past a giant white spruce, and I allow myself to feel the melancholy that always seems to drift below the joy I feel, whenever I'm out on my evening journeys. I don't know if what I'm seeing here, now, will still be here when I'm gone. A hundred years ago there were herds of woodland caribou in this region. By the time I was born, there were none.

Tonight, the smoke paints the stratosphere in a greyish-white haze, but the air below is now clean and fresh. It's unusually quiet in the marsh tonight, possibly because I started out just as dusk was falling. Two birds fly in, ring-necked ducks, a male and female—the male a stark almost geometric pattern of black and white, the female a drab brown. The first of the wild marsh irises have bloomed, their petals blending from deep to soft mauve to an intense yellowish green center veined in elegant curving lines of deep purple.

The canoe cooperates, remaining still as it sometimes does while I photograph the blooms. There's something about dusk, the fading light that intensifies colour, makes the blooms and the forest even more beautiful. The new growth that forms a frilly, almost lime green crinoline on the bows of the spruce trees seems to vibrate, grows brighter in contrast to the deep shade near their trunks.

There's something about being in a canoe, low to the water and moving slowly that suits me—puts me inside Nature rather than above or outside it, generates a feeling of belonging to something infinitely larger and more complex than I could ever fully comprehend. So while I feel the ache of loss tonight, I also feel extraordinarily lucky just to float on the water, listening to the trilling of the birds, the call of the frogs, watching the movements of an adult beaver, sleek, silent, and effortless in the water.

ERNA BUFFIE is an award-winning documentary filmmaker who has worked for CBC's *The Nature of Things* and various international broadcasters. Her film *Smarty Plants* won "Best Direction" at the Canadian Screen Awards and aired on PBS Nature under the title *What Plants Talk About*. Her short stories have appeared in variety of journals including *Room*, *Prairie Fire* and *The Vagrant Review of New Fiction*. Her novel, *Let Us Be True* (Coteau Books), was published in 2015 and nominated for the Margaret Laurence Fiction Prize. The novel will be reissued in 2023 by Shadowpaw Press.