

Generational Power of the Big Lake

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Geography shapes our lives and often guides what we write. Chaucer made that road trip to Canterbury. Washington Irving wrote New York and, even Columbus, as both idea and city. Jerusalem and its environs generated competing faiths. My older son is now the principal investigator for the radiation experiment with the *Curiosity* rover on Mars, intended literally to see if we can settle there. Usually, my own writing lives in the cool country of the activist folk singer like Tom Paxton or Greg Brown, who used to make his northern tour every summer around the Keweenaw, where my wife and I have our summer camp. But Paxton grew up in rural Oklahoma, and my wife dated him in Norman when they both were college students there. So getting wind of that again, as I do every time he comes around to give a concert in Kent, has fueled these cool thoughts on our own, personal geography, and our own family romance of relationship across time.

I am not sure of its name, but it must be female. I mean that wind from the southwest that originates in Mexico, blows up across the high flat land across Texas and Oklahoma with very little to slow it down before it heats up Chicago, and whips on into Lake Superior in July or August. As I say, usually it is cool in the Upper Peninsula of Michigan but not when that wind blows up from the South. I am convinced that the women in my life have been like that wind, and I think my luminal movement to the north has been

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blown by that wind. Conversely, it may be the totem of the Big Lake itself that draws, or sucks, the wind and me north.

But long before I knew anything about the wind and, in fact, a decade before the Keweenaw in the Upper Peninsula even had telephones, my parents started renting a cottage at Old Homestead Beach a mile east of Huron on Lake Erie. The war was on, and no new tires were to be had and the gas was rationed. So we had to drive the eighty miles or so slowly with frequent stops for my Dad to patch and pump air into old rubber. Years later after both my parents were dead and I was happily into my second marriage, memory brought back what my mom had told me about my dad's marriage proposal to her on a crystal-clear, romantic lake in Michigan. That moment had been during the early Great Depression years, but to hear them tell it they must have felt like Wallis and the King of England. She was remembering and passing on to me family romance.

We are all commoners in America, however, and try to work to be cool, to avoid that hot wind from the South. But family romance generates our coolness always. I married first a Texas girl. My mom had been born in Oklahoma. The mother of the boys died the year of the American Bicentennial. By then I was teaching science fiction, and the following year I married again. My wife, who had dated her fellow Oklahoman the singer, had later married another singer, who did not want to stay married, and they had two girls. So our family romance blended, finally, in a marvelous symmetry. When my wife and I had the opportunity to buy our place far north, we did.

Last summer with the kids all grown and gone, we then at last made it out to the upper edge of the Big Lake, near the wide entrance to Keweenaw Bay. The Park Service boat we took, called the Ranger III, went out just a little way and then turned back into the channel. We had only signed up for the two-hour cruise. But at the turn, the lake stretched out, very large, gray and churning. This was much different from what I remembered of the Lake Erie beach near the breakwater rocks at Huron in Ohio. Though we only have a few black-and-white old photos from the 1940s, I see that time of war in my mind as soft and warm in color. Strangely, we are more or less at peace now, but the color has darkened some. And there is the wind.