

Silence and Slow Time

When my daughters were young and still imaginative, in that wonderful time when the lines between their lives and mythology are so blurred and children can, involuntarily almost, slip through the lines at whim, we shared a cabin in Canada's wilderness with another family. Their children, being at a different time in their lives, did not interact well with mine, and thus, as is so often the case in these situations of inter-family tension, it fell upon me to take the girls away for a "breather".

Life at the cabin in Canada is almost entirely focused on the "lake". From dawn to dusk families live in the water. And when it is too cold or too blustery, they gather with board games at the window overlooking the lake, or don wetsuits and brave the cold for a chance to windsurf, or huddle in aluminum boats over a favourite fishing hole. Clearly I had to turn my daughters from this congregation to new vistas and so it was that we tramped off, 5, 8, and 42 year olds into the rocks and scraggly pines of the Canadian Shield.

The beauty of the Shield is not readily visible from the backseat of a car, and my daughters had travelled yearly from the hardscrabble dirt farm existence of one set of grandparents, who tentatively begged an existence from the edge of the Palliser Triangle in southern Alberta, to the potholed streets of Montreal's "balconville" where the other grandparents endured the working-class gossip shouted from one balcony to the other. Rarely had they had the chance to stop to explore the myth-shaping rivers and forests of Canada's backbone.

Now, we three meandered gently deeper into the woods, taking time to distract ourselves from the bewilderment caused by the tension back at the cabin. At one point, coming into a small clearing graced with a fallen log, and, perhaps, with a bit of sunlight angling through skeletal spruce. Add some wispy moss hanging from dry branches, place a small rock face on one side of the clearing, and a world was born.

Children can be so adept at taking the great geographical emptiness and filling it with narratives. I remember once, when my daughter was still quite young, going to pick her up at her school, and because the children were all out in the playground, I decided to wait until the bell would ring to bring them back into the school. I spotted her sitting all alone, on the snow, in the middle of the large space. There were no other children around her, and she appeared to be drawing in the snow. I was crushed, thinking of the deep loneliness she must be feeling. Later, questioning her, I realized that she had not been lonely - her imagination had created worlds that only she could inhabit.

That day in the Shield, we told each other the story of that place. Magical forces rose up out of the granite, drifted down from the filtered sky, and came echoing through the trees and for that afternoon and subsequent afternoons, we collectively lived these stories. Today my children are adults, and yet they can still clearly recall the "friends" we made on those afternoons when we left the noise of the cabin to "hear" the stories of the forest.

Some photographers are skilled at capturing the vast empty spaces of Canada and their depictions crush us with a lonely beauty that leaves a great

hunger. Christoph and Maja Hammer, though, have retained that primitive innocence, and their photographs “fill” the geography of Canada with narratives. Although the huge skies, the endless highways, and the asymmetrical landscapes of their photographs daunt us, it is more in awe than in fear. What could so easily be reduced to a cliché, through their lenses becomes a story that we want to hear again and again. Here we are about to slip a canoe in the lake on our way to see a friend living on the distant island, or here we are wandering down the street on our way to the local café to grab a cup of coffee. The weather hangs huge over our heads, and we know that tomorrow we might have to change our story, but for the moment the narrative holds.

These photographs, like the urn in Keats’ poem, are stories “still unravish’d” by the forces of time. The foreboding sky promising wind and hail and destruction upon the fields of prairie wheat, the boat waiting in the harbour, the train trestle turned to let a boat pass, are all forever frozen in time. We “hear” the story of the field about to be destroyed, of the fish about to be unloaded from the depths of the boat, and of the trackman who is about to turn the trestle back for the 4 o’clock train before he goes home to his wife and children. We know these stories to be true, and these photographs, capturing the moment when our lives and our mythologies intersect, serve as their constant agents of “silence and slow time.”

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September 2015