

The Windward Shore

A WINTER ON THE GREAT LAKES



Jerry Dennis

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PROLOGUE

This Land, This Water



This land, surrounded and surmounted by waters; this underappreciated and overexploited provincial backwater deep in the belly of North America; this quilt-work landscape of woodlots and cornfields, of cut-over forests and vestigial prairies, of industrial parks and subdivisions and bunched-up cities on the shore, of bedrock and dunes and glacial hills and limestone scarps and so many ecologically sensitive rivers, lakes, swamps, bogs, fens, marshes, sloughs, and frog ponds that frustrated shopping-mall developers from Minneapolis to Montreal are tearing out their hair and stomping on kittens; just flyover country for the power elite until they want something from it; once hailed as the Great Northwest Territory and now a geographically amorphous swath across the Upper Midwest and Lower Canada, reaching not quite to New England and the Maritimes in the east and not quite to the Heartland in the west, though Heartland virtues persist here even as the farms and factories that cultivated them wither; where the trees, trout, beaver, iron, copper, oil, topsoil, water views, and labor pool have always been ripe for plundering but are damn near depleted now; where sacrifices that fueled the rise of empires while draining most of the profits away have rarely been acknowledged and never recompensed; where five astonishing seas of fresh water that once were as secure as

money in the bank remain our epicenter, our capital, our strength, and our delight but are no longer secure; this land that is as sprawling and messy, gorgeous and ugly, dynamic, diverse, complex, perplexing, heartening, and heartbreaking as the two nations that encircle it—this is my home.

It is not an easy place to know. Nor is any place. Many explorers of the near-at-hand have discovered that one lifetime isn't enough to learn a county, a town, even a backyard. Walk a trail a dozen times, and you remain a stranger to it. A hundred times, and you might earn a nodding acquaintance. Walk it in snow, in rain, alone and in company with kids and dogs and friends, under a full moon and a new moon, in the fog, in a blizzard, with your eyes shut and your feet seeking the way by touch, and maybe you'll become familiar enough to call it by name. But do you know it?

When children memorize a song or a poem they say they have "learned it by heart." I'm trying to learn this land, my home, by heart. But I don't know if my heart is big enough.

And I don't know if I'm writing a love song or a lament.

Both, probably. Both and more. For a complex subject requires a complex song.



Here are some of the most beautiful places in North America, and the ugliest. Some of the cleanest, and the most fouled. Some of the richest, and the poorest.

Here are the Rust Belt, the Corn Belt, and the Sweetwater Coast.

Here are legislative suckholes and key battlegrounds of presidential elections.

Here is the neck of the funnel of the economic outpourings of two great nations, but the money seldom stays here.

Here is Cornucopia, spewer of soybeans and taconite; of ethanol and Buffalo wings; of steel and wheat and Wheaties; of sugar beets and cherries and crushed stone and birds-eye maple and Ford trucks and ginseng; of Labatt and Miller Lite; of copy paper and deep-dish pizza; of corn flakes, Vernors, disposable diapers, butter, blueberries, yellow perch, and Christmas trees.

Here is energy flow—the hub of airlines and pipelines, of steel rails, interstates, and freshwater freeways—and the terminus of orphan trains, the Underground Railroad, and the Hillbilly Highway.

Here is a place so large that it's overlooked, so familiar that it's invisible, so beloved that it's despised, so precious that we're intent upon ransacking it. It is shot through with stunning natural beauty, but the world notices mostly the sullied and degraded. It's home to tens of millions of people divided, as everywhere, between those who care and those who don't give a rat's ass, and most of whom dream of moving south in the winter.

If it were smaller, it would be more appreciated. If it were under the aegis of a single state, province, or tribal nation, it would be better safeguarded. If it had a primary identity—swampy, like the Everglades; estuarial, like the Chesapeake; alpine, like the Sierra Nevada—it would be understood.

But it sprawls across borders. It has a hundred identities. It lacks a dominant mythology. It is too immense to grasp, too varied to brand, too tarnished to romanticize.

It is land held together by water. That is one feature shared throughout. An ocean of freshwater. A rolling, rushing, surging, gushing, lapping abundance of water, enough to slake the thirst of nations, enough to float a civilization, enough to be the envy of the world. It's a motherlode—*the* motherlode—and we cherish it, ignore it, hoard it, waste it, guzzle it, cleanse our sins in it, and use it as a toilet.

Let this be a celebration, then, and a grieving. Both a love song and a lament. A tribute to what was and a plea for what remains.

INTRODUCTION

On Cathead Point



Lake Michigan is calm this morning. It spreads before me like a vast desert or plain to a horizon line so fine it could have been scored with a knife. You can sense the curve of the earth across that Mojave distance, can imagine Pleistocene currents coursing through its black canyon depths. Even here, seven hundred miles from salt wind and tide surge, you can feel the ocean's pull.

It's dawn on the first day of January, and I'm staying in a borrowed house on Cathead Point, five miles from the village of Northport, Michigan, and nearly at the tip of the Leelanau Peninsula. People in Michigan's Lower Peninsula orient one another by holding up a hand and pointing to a spot on the mitten. I'm at the end of the little finger.

For months I've planned to begin this book here, on this day, in this house overlooking the lake, even at this very hour, dawn on our traditional day of new beginnings.

But who can say when anything begins? I could as truthfully claim this book began last fall in a log cabin on the shore of Lake Superior. And it would be true as well to say it began in January three years ago when I cleared my desk of everything but a few books and started thinking about time and transience, abundance and diversity, fugues, storms, waves, and wind. That winter I became interested in the an-

cient Japanese prose genre called *zuihitsu*, or “follow the brush,” a literary form and a way of life practiced by Buddhist hermit-poets like Chōmei, who at age fifty retreated into the mountains and wrote *An Account of My Hut*, a Japanese *Walden* six hundred years before Thoreau. I’m not a Buddhist and am only intermittently a hermit, but every morning for three months I followed the brush down the page in a mood of receptivity so acute that it stayed with me all day, during walks across the snow-covered fields and on the shore ice along the bay, while plowing the driveway, during evenings with my family and friends, and even into sleep. I was not distracted—just the opposite. Everything I saw was in finer focus, and every incident seemed significant. Time slowed until individual moments separated and grew plump, and I picked them, held them in my palm, and popped them one after another into my mouth, savoring them as if they were berries. I remembered childhood was filled with moments like that: plump and succulent. And, as in childhood, every snowflake and cedar frond, every fox and goldfinch, every car passing on the road and every cloud passing in the sky was unique, vivid, and vibrating with actuality. The world brimmed with an astonishment of things, and each was adjoined by all other things.

Everything was equally wondrous. I would examine any ordinary object—a pencil, a stone, a feather, my hand resting on my desk—and be struck by how strange it seemed. It was literally too strange for words: a unique, fluid, miraculous, thing-in-the-universe with no name, that could *not* be named. I saw that every paperclip, shirt button, fingernail, and coffee cup in some form or other had been spinning, drifting, hurtling, or flowing through the universe since the beginning of time. Matter was not solid, but was a loose assemblage of sparks spinning in space. It was encapsulated energy. Objects were not even objects, they were momentary events that at this moment and at every other moment of their existence were in the process of becoming something else. Coins and pebbles were in flux as surely as rivers and snowflakes. Everywhere I looked were atoms and molecules shifting from one mysteriously adhering form into another. What made them adhere? Why should one cluster of atoms become a snowflake and another a red-haired girl? What prevents our bodies from disintegrating to their com-

ponent atoms? What keeps the earth from crumbling beneath our feet? Our situation is so precarious that I was amazed that anyone can get out of bed in the morning, let alone drive a car or cook a meal. I studied the people around me and was awestruck. I had never appreciated how much courage it takes to live an ordinary life.

As the days warmed in the spring I became restless. Already I was looking back on the winter as an idyll and wanted another like it. But not yet. Three months at a desk is too long; I had to get outside and *do* something. I fished, canoed, played basketball with my sons and friends, searched the woods for morel mushrooms, kept a record of migratory birds. On May 10, for the third year running, the first oriole arrived in our yard. Two days later a pair of phoebes constructed an exquisite nest of green moss on the light fixture over our front door. Trees burst into leaf, and summer arrived. One morning in July I set out walking along the shore of Lake Michigan near my home, in this land of dunes and wooded hills where I have lived most of my life, just to see what I could see. That walk was so enjoyable that I returned the next morning to continue where I'd left off, then returned the morning after that to continue where I'd left off again, and, before I had thought much about it, I had walked sixty miles and could see my way ahead to hundreds more, down the coast to Indiana and Chicago, and up the Wisconsin coast as well. Then a fit of grandeur came over me, and I imagined walking around all five of the Great Lakes—ten thousand miles!—joined along the way by insightful people who would share their thoughts about the lakes, their lives, the world, the universe. I would listen intently while keeping pace, my head up and eyes open, growing smarter and leaner with every mile, and report back with what I had learned.

That reverie ended one evening at my neighborhood gym when a young man and I leaped at the same time for a basketball and came down tangled in each other's legs. While I lay on the floor clutching my knee one of my friends said, "I heard it pop all the way across the court! I bet it's his *ACLU!*" A doctor informed me that surgery to replace the snapped ligament would restore mobility, but my days of competitive basketball were over. "Satisfy my curiosity," he said. "What made you

think that fifty-year-old knees could compete with twenty-year-old knees?”

Fifty years! Doctor, I had no idea.

In the following weeks I was startled to learn that slowing down can have some advantages. That realization arrived while I was still on crutches, in a motel in Manistique, Michigan, where my wife, after patient coaxing, convinced me to sit with her in a bubbling tub of hot water with a cold drink in my hand, and watch the sun go down over Lake Michigan. *Stationary*, I realized, is not necessarily the same as *passive*. *Going slower*, I saw with sudden clarity, doesn't mean *stopping*. The insight was so unexpected that I might have shouted in surprise. Gail was pleased. She kissed me on the cheek and promised that as soon as that troublesome right knee was healed she was going after the left one with a baseball bat.

The concept of living at a slower pace dovetailed with some ideas I'd begun exploring that bountiful winter of *zuihitsu*—the one, for instance, about trying to be more attentive to what's going on around me. I was starting to see the benefits. And I admit I was getting a little tired of headlong plunges and furious sprints. Living slowly, deliberately, with greater awareness, has been recommended by wise people for thousands of years. Apparently I'd been ignoring their advice at my peril.

So I decided to stay close to home for a while. Instead of walking all those miles around the Great Lakes, I would live in a few houses on the shore and explore the near-at-hand. It occurred to me that looking at the world through someone else's windows might be like seeing through their eyes. Maybe walking the trails they made, reading the books on their shelves, getting to know the places where they lived would expand my own view and lead to a better understanding of our relationship with the Great Lakes and our relationship with nature in the larger sense as well. I wanted to present a true picture of a complex region, part of my continuing project to learn at least one place on earth reasonably well, and trusted that it would appear gradually and accumulatively—and not as a conventional portrait, but as a mosaic with depth, breadth, and range that included the sounds and scents

and textures of the place and its inhabitants. (And if, along the way, a picture of the author appeared also, so be it. That was not my intention, but you are welcome to it.) Bolstered by the notion that a book is a journey that author and reader walk together, I would search for promising trails and follow them as far as my reconstructed knee would allow. I would try to live a *zuihitsu* life.