

## All Waters Meet

John Smolens

In July, Lake Superior's pastel horizon remains forever out of reach. Though I trim the genoa and harden the main on the *Mary B*, sailing so close to the wind that the stays and shrouds whistle, I never reach the earth's rim. There are no boundaries, no edges, only the soft arc where water meets sky. A summer afternoon on the Lake is like sailing away from time.

Who hasn't paused to watch the sun and the moon rise above the Lake? In such moments we can sense the earth turning, a blue timepiece spinning through the celestial sea, an intricate dance of orbiting bodies in perpetual motion. Stargazing scientists suggest that the universe never ends, a notion that is difficult to grasp but I have come to believe it, to accept that we live in a firmament that is part of an eternal cosmos and that our mortality is a necessary contribution to the infinite.

When my wife Patricia (Reesha, to friends) was dying of a brain tumor, she spent months in hospice care, confined to a hospital bed, looking out our den windows toward the Lake. I am convinced that she died in stages: repeatedly she went away and she came back, and while away she journeyed out there—wherever there is—and found that it was neither dark nor threatening, that it provided neither reward nor judgement. Her coming and going was necessary preparation, and when it was time she was ready to go. These days, there is little else I take comfort in, but that is enough: out there beyond the Lake lies eternity and it is not to be feared but embraced.

Four years before Reesha died, my mother suffered a massive stroke, which confined her for months to a hospital bed near my sister's home in Oregon. The last time I sat with my mother she told me what we should do after: spread her ashes on the Lake. The summer days we sailed out from the Lower Harbor reminded her of

the years she spent on Cape Cod. I suggested we could take her to Nantucket Sound, where our father had gone 26 years earlier.

She shook her head: The Lake.

You don't want to be near him?

I will be, she said. All waters meet.

All waters meet gave me a new definition of geography, of distance, of how one thing relates to another. From my den windows I can see where my mother and Reesha are, due east of the rocks in McCarty's Cove. They are there, yes, but they are everywhere that there is water. They went in on the same day, August 4, four years apart, both days filled with sun, myriad variations of blue, and light breezes. When you pour ashes into the Lake, they turn colors; in the cases of both my mother and wife it was a luminous turquoise, which spread and shifted, moving with the mystery of smoke as it drifted down into the darkening water, translucent particles flickering as though alive, finally released in their element. We chose August fourth because it is my brother Peter's birthday, so on both occasions we returned to my house and commemorated his new year. When it is my turn, my surviving family knows where to take me, how to set the sails, how to return and once again celebrate. Latitude and longitude provide certainty and solace.

My mother loved to collect seashells on Cape Cod; Reesha to collect beach stones anywhere. You only need hold such a stone in your hand, rounded smooth, to appreciate the inexorable force of water; it is beautiful not just for what it is but for what has been worn away. A beach stone may be the one true manifestation of time. Lake Superior is a relatively young body of water, the result of the most recent glacial age. But what is important is that the Lake was always meant to be; for us it always will be. We are fortunate to live on the shores of eternity. We can see its horizon, and on a summer's day we can set sail for that place where water meets sky, knowing we can never reach it.



