

Second Place

Essential Trace Elements

In August, seven of us went to Glenn's cabin at Bird Lake, north-east of Winnipeg. These are some of the photographs I took and things I remember.

Snapshot #1

Sandra's fooling around again. Here inside the cabin she bends over, tickling Eric, squeezing his gut like a bottle of dishwashing liquid. His laugh is caught mid-spurt and he's about to swing his arm to make a grab for Sandra somewhere in her baggy, white kangaroo jacket. This photograph pins Eric in an awkward position, cross-legged on the wicker rug wearing only cutoff jeans. A lot is exposed and his long, thick hair keeps falling in his face. One of his rare, vulnerable moments.

Behind them Gabriela stirs a pot on the stove. She wears a blue swimsuit and a red towel is wrapped around her waist. Onion smell permeates her. When she adjusts her glasses her hands give her eyes a waft of onion juice but she just has to smile. She's forgotten about nursing school and family disputes for awhile. Here she's able to jump in the lake whenever she wants to wash anything off. Rock and roll music beats from the tape deck on the table and Gabriela dances. She shakes her hips, swoops, turns around and then gives her loud 'Hng-Hng' laugh.

Glenn's grandmother, Pauline, chops up apples for a pie on the same chipping board Gabriela will later use. It is 1962. Glenn is not yet born. Pauline is 53. She looks out the window and wonders how many grandchildren she will have and if they'll all get the chance to come here before the bomb is dropped. The next day she'll realize there's no use for these morbid thoughts. It's never the end of the world until it's the end of the world.

Snapshot #2

This is a 'morning after' shot but is disguised. All 6 of my friends lie on a rock ledge, sunbathing, arranged randomly where they could find flat, smooth areas to cling to like lichen. We're hung over.

(Last night we had a campfire at the campground. The northern lights swirled above while we drank beer and ate scorched hotdogs. We passed around the guitar. Eric played his blues. Gabriela, Eric and Catherine brought sleeping bags and slept around the fire. The rest of us thought they were crazy. In the morning I asked them if they had been cold. Eric said, "no way, man, we weren't cold at all." Then Samantha explained, "It was freezing here in the cabin.") Glenn, whose back faces me, has hair wet from the lake which he has jumped into 3 times. He sits gingerly on his bum, partly supported by his arms stretched backwards. He was the first to jump, doing so from about 40 feet. He landed tilted back, bruising his bum when he hit the surface. He never knew water could be so hard.

Samantha's right hand shakes her eyes and the other lies on her stomach which is upset from last night's tequila and growling because she had no breakfast. Blueberry lingers on her tongue. She found about as many blueberries as there are days of summer left. Samantha is thinking about grade 13, which she has yet to endure and about a grocery store tabloid she flipped through when we stopped to buy supplies in Lac du Bonnet. (Movie stars, the dead coming to life, space people.) "Who comes up with all this concocted information?" she wonders. Glenn asks her, "how was the train ride out?" Sandra (who will try anything once) and I (who tend to regret foolish acts) are the only other two who jumped from the ledge. We went from about two-thirds the height Glenn fell from. Falling, yelling. A sudden shiny, blue tie-dye of bubbles and sensations. A gelatinous under-world. We had to do it a few more times.

(At the bottom of the lake are the bones of a 20-year-old Cree man who jumped from the ledge years ago completely exhausted, giving up on his vision quest.)

After we each jumped three times we joined the others. I shook my head so they got wet and called them chickens. They never even went swimming. Sandra, Glenn and I lay down on the rocks, buzzed with vertigo. An osprey flew over the lake hunting for fish. Looking up I thought, "birds and fish are lucky because they aren't anchored."

Snapshot #3

Glenn, Sandra, Eric (and I) are here in the rowboat, fishing. Eric, the prominent figure, is casting. His long, blond hair is held in an elastic band. No university student would grow his hair

this long these days just to be cool. Eric thinks university is total bullshit anyway. He doesn't understand why I go, says, "Doug, you could learn things better just by living. And doing things in person." He sneers slightly at the sun. He's a student of the world and its hallucinogens.

The slick, silver muscles swim far beneath us, like ideas we might never catch.

Sandra tries to unclip the fishing lure from its leader and put on another without poking her finger. This thing is a wicked earring to her. Here, she is off of her element. This is a bizarre exercise. She scowls but doesn't complain. Glenn laughs. "Sandra, you look like a goldfish stuck in a bowl."

(On the map, this lake looks the same as other lakes in the Canadian Shield, (long, narrow, deep). Hootprints of a herd of huge, wild animals stampeding in escape.)

Glenn loves to fish but doesn't mind rowing. He strokes the oars slowly so they make that sensuous licking and dripping sound. (Later that summer, to my surprise, Glenn told me he gave up fishing. He went out one time with a friend, without anything to knock the fish out with. There was lots of flailing and because the fish swallowed the lure, blood will end up coating the insides of the boat. He didn't really want to talk about it.) Chance things happen, remain, and change you forever. Things that you don't expect will do so. Most of what happens gets lost. If you threw everything in your bedroom into this lake, just a few things (pencils, a carving maybe and a light bulb) would float. Things you might not consider important. What remains is all you've got to go on. Be careful. This lake is deep. You've got to be well-equipped to go bottom fishing.

Snapshot #4

Have I mentioned Catherine yet? She's sitting here on the cabin deck reading her french Fodor's book about Mexico. She plans to go there after she hitch-hikes to Vancouver. She's on page 267 which details ancient curses and stone carvings. Here in Canada, she thinks, curses are swear words that get lost in the woods, sighed or laughed out. Carvings are initials hucked in tree bark or they're made of stone way up north and flown south to be put behind glass. She wears her father's red, beatnik sweater from his pre-bureaucrat days.

Her slightly spiked hair is drying in the sun and shines with her John Lennon glasses. She concentrates on reading, but there is a piece of onion between her teeth she is trying to get at. I take photos of her when she's not looking. She hates having her picture taken but she loves photography and film. She likes to be the one playing with the filters and the timing device or maybe using a wide-angle lens to put more in the photograph than is really there. With her camera she stops time, grips the present. She sees the days of the future as the unexposed negatives in the rolls of film in the piles on the shelf in a camera store. From here on the cabin deck, everything looks relatively clear-cut. The steep strip of grass down to the lake is flanked by huge pines dropping jagged, chilly shadows. In other places and at other times I am lost in a forest My compass spins and I stumble in hunger. Sometime I come to the edge of a lake and tumble in. Jolted awake and cleansed but still lost.

Will an unborn niece or grandchild find these photographs with curled edges in a shoebox, wonder who these people are, how funny the clothing is, why neither I nor anyone they know is in them? Or will the photos end up in a dump or burnt? The millions of random chemicals on their surfaces liberated again.

Snapshot #5

At first glance, this one looks totally underexposed; murky. Look hard because this is a picture of you on the pier at sunset. I brought you here and made you put on these rolled-up blue jeans and the grey sweatshirt. At the click I've caught you too with my little black box. You stare straight at me. You have a number of choices; turn around, splash into the cold lake, or push your way past me, run up to the cabin and ask one of the others for an explanation. You know I won't give you one. You can ask one of the others just what the hell is going on. I'd like to know as well.

by Douglas Schmidt

