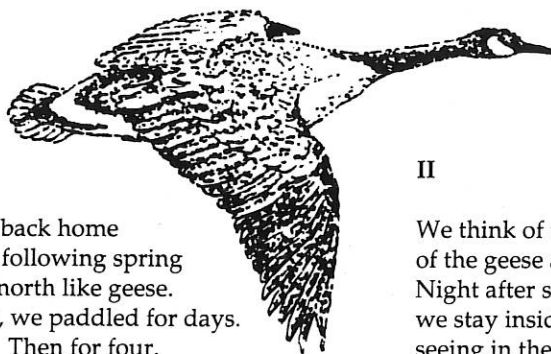


# Shaman's Lake by George Vukelich

T. White



## I

When the war was over, we came back home for only one brief winter, then the following spring we quit the city, packed up, went north like geese. Beyond the end of the gravel road, we paddled for days. Then for one week. Then for two. Then for four. We stopped only when we found this lake.

That year we never knew this was the shaman's lake. Before next ice-out he came, camped in his ancestral home. Looking right through us, he built his fire, faced all four directions, murmuring in the last snow before the spring. In three nights' time, ice was tinkling. The following days filled to the brims with the bugling of geese.

Those mornings we awoke to thousands of geese, no, tens of thousands, filling the sky, filling the lake. It went on like that for days and days and days, yet, always we sensed that this was not their home. That spring on this lake was like no other spring, the strangest season of any of the four.

It seemed the great flocks were coming from all four corners of the world. Great clouds of the wildest geese: Blues and Snows and Canadas, babbling torrents of spring rushing down, raising up the waters of the lake. We watched the Old Man watching geese rain down on his home. He never moved from one spot for three nights and three days.

He seemed in a trance; the geese fell quiet those days. Tens of thousands of geese, still as gravestones at four in the morning. Finally, they moved, seeming to home on the silent figure of the Old Man. Surrounded by geese he disappeared from our glasses as every goose left the lake empty. *Every goose* climbing the far shore that strange spring.

We have told some others of those happenings that spring, those happenings that yet disturb our nights and our days. When the geese around the Old Man retreated back to the lake, there was no human to be seen on that shore. There were four stones, marking, we think, East. West. South. North. The geese that day flew north, forsaking, forever, this lake we call home.

Once, the northern spring was our favorite of the four. Now, the lake ice goes out and there are no geese. Not a one. *Not a one*, in this Godforsaken place we still call home.

## II

We think of them often as we walk the far shore, of the geese and the shaman gone to God only knows where. Night after starry night when the chill darkness falls, we stay inside the cabin, dreaming at our fire, seeing in the stove flames, the Old Man's face and the birds gathered around him, silent as stones.

*We know* what we saw in this strange place of stones. A mystery happened out there on that shore. *Mystery*, as near, yet, as far from our world as the face of the moon, for when we walk that other shore where the Old Man stood, there comes a crackling of fire. We see it: blue, green, electric fire. It surges, falls.

It is a mark of holy places: of mountains, of waterfalls, of crystal pure waters rushing, rushing through stones. Once, twice, in sunlight we tried to light our cooking fire in the exact place the Old Man had built his on that shore. Our woodsticks, brittle, bone dry, *would not burn at all* where the shaman's old fires still blackened the granite rock face.

We do not know how you would put the proper face on factual happenings such as these. There are pitfalls in just telling this story. We have to be careful where we tell it. Some people get angry enough to throw stones at you. They think all that stuff about the crazy far shore is only to make *them* look foolish. It just sets them on fire.

But whether people stay cool as ice or get hot as a fire makes about as much difference as a flea on the face of a glacier. What happened on that far, mysterious shore happened. On this planet, we think everything falls, pulled by gravity, toward the center, but there are stones subject to a different law and the shaman can tell you where.

We think we know why the shaman left us, but where he went we do not know. He left because we came. A fire on the beach and then he left us with stones. That was frightening enough, but now we have seen his face in three places. Once, a radiance in the waterfalls, a luminescence above the lake. A watching from the far shore.

Now, another terrifying knowledge stares us right in the face. We are on the brink of sheer terror, on the brink of the falls. *No dry woodsticks will burn now on either lake shore.*

George Vukelich contributes columns to *Isthmus of Madison* and hosts a Sunday night program on Wisconsin Public Radio. "Shaman's Lake" first appeared in his *North County Notebook* column.