

NORTH COUNTRY NOTEBOOK/George Vukelich

Salutary Sea

A couple of days up at the Kellman cottage in Door County always has a salutary effect on me.

I tell Steady Eddy that what happens up there on the sweeping Lake Michigan beaches is cleansing, somehow—it just airs you out.

Steady tells me that what *really* happens up there is that the famous Door County water seeps into every nook and cranny of your system and you only *think* you have been aired out.

"Actually," Steady says, "you are more 'flushed out' than 'aired out.' It's like Hugo Willie over at the Gasoline Emporium sticking the garden hose down the throat of the radiator in the

old Torino. No wonder you feel cleansed."

There are places where you go, primarily, to fish. Or swim, sail, canoe, or whatever.

This cottage is a place where you go, primarily, to beachcomb. It is a place (and with condominiums sprouting like toadstools throughout the peninsula, places like this get harder to find) where it's easy to enter that seam in time and be, again, a barefoot child on Fisherman's Beach, walking the littered sand after a big three-day storm, gawking at the debris in the wake of the violence and the great waves now pacified,

prowling quietly, their low profiles undulating like intense hunting otters stalking the unsuspecting schooled fish.

Tangles of seaweed lie high up on the beach, marking the true boundaries of this inland sea. The tangles are circular, rolled-up universes containing dead alewives, silvery as mirrors, and miles of balled-up monofilament trolling line compressed into ganglia that will fit into your hands like the stringy guts pulled from a slitted salmon.

In the sea wrack is a green-jointed J-plug, motionless, hookless, disgorged by the great sea even as it was disgorged by the great fish.

Murmuring, murmuring, this great animal called Sea, picking and licking at

its body, digesting everything it can, spitting out everything it cannot.



Down the beach from the cottage, a neighbor whom we have never seen has worked diligently over the seasons to construct a ramp for his fishing boat.

It was the only one I had ever seen so constructed.

It was made of evenly spaced, bolted-down concrete slabs. Heavy-duty. I cleaned a six-pound brown there one calm, blue day. The herring gulls found me before I had finished and I shared the fish with them.

"If the gulls had given *you* the guts," Steady Eddy says, "what would you have called it then?"

When I washed the blood off the concrete slab, it felt strong and permanent. Over the years, this tough, man-made structure had weathered like the great rocks offshore, grown smooth in the endless ebb and flow, and been accepted by the sea as part of itself.

Now, the concrete ramp was unrecognizable. The slabs that only last season had seemed to be there for eternity had been stripped away, the way you take boards off a barn to be sawed and used again.

The slabs were visible in the shallows, strewn this way and that, looking gray on the bottom, looking like a load of silvery barnboards that had fallen off a truck. The ramp was no longer serviceable. The tin fishing boat had been stored for the winter near the cottage. It sat there forlornly—"like a fish out of water," Steady would say—and you got the feeling that it would be sitting there for a while.

There was a feeling of trauma in the air.

The great inland sea had overwhelmed the great concrete ramp, and there was a lesson there for all of us who walk this beach on the calm days when we know that we are indeed the salt of this earth and the masters of all we survey from horizon to blue, hazy horizon.



I think it's the name "Lake Michigan" that fools people about its power. Somehow, "lake" doesn't convey what "ocean" or "sea" conveys. Lake Michigan is not a Great "Lake"—it is a Great Inland Sea.

I remember the North Atlantic on a troopship in a winter storm and Lake Michigan on an ore boat in a November storm, and Lake Michigan was scarier. The ore boat was twice as big as the troopship, but it was no contest. There are old sailors around who have sailed both the salt and the fresh water, and there isn't enough money to keep them sailing the Great Lakes once November comes.

Everyone who hangs around the inland seas has a story for you about their awesome power: rudders banged loose from the biggest lake carriers, sea walls and concrete ramps blown apart, land masses falling into the water as if cannonaded.

My story for you is from a little island in Lake Michigan, a primitive place with limestone cliffs and cobble beaches.

We waded past a limestone outcropping and there in the cold, clear waters lay an endless length of anchor chain, curled, black and serpentine. *Monstrous*. Each link was wider than a man; the chain must have come from an enormous ship. How many men to carry this piece? A hundred? Two hundred? How much machinery? How much power? What kind of sea was running to sweep this in like a string?

The chain is there yet. Every time I see it, I get a funny feeling.

"Salutary," Steady says. "Salutary." ■