

# Life, death on the Lake Michigan beach

10-4-79

Ever since I was a little boy, I have loved to walk the Lake Michigan beaches.

They are magical zones, these land's end places, where some times the birds are silent and the very stones speak. Beaches change overnight. One day clean as a trout's belly. The next, littered with seawrack and seaweed and dead fish, pieces of nets and gear. And anchor chain so heavy no mortal on earth could move it an inch, yet these waters moved it for miles and miles.

Vince and I walked a Door County beach the other day homeward from fishing, the sandpipers scurrying before us like a flock of chickens, the gulls patrolling the shallows for dead things, the great inland sea crashing into rock and land and muttering to itself like an old person, preoccupied, Preoccupied.

I watched Vince move down the



## North Country Notebook

shore and I knew that young people belong on beaches. They are more amphibian, more flowing, closer to their own creation than we old ones who forget or deny that we are of the water and the water is of us. The young ones do not deny. The pulse of the sea is strong in their souls and they race along the edge of our world happy as otters, serious as clams.

When I caught up to Vince, he was waiting, standing over the dead brown trout, a salmon-sized corpse swathed in the whitish fungus stretched in the sand like a cadaver posted for autopsy, one eye neatly removed, as if with a scalpel.

Vince knew a gull had taken the

eye. He knew a gull would come to take the other.

We moved down the beach and he kept looking back. Looking for that gull. I did not look back as often and then he became an otter again and moved away. When I caught up, he was standing over a butterfly, alive but bedraggled with dampness. It lay in the wind, helpless as a capsized sailboat.

Vince got the butterfly on his finger, carried it to a half-buried log, smoothed out the sand on the lee side and placed the butterfly out of the wind, in the hot sun.

He knew it would dry out there. He knew too that he felt something for that butterfly. He wished it well and I remembered

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how he talked to tulip bulbs when he planted them years ago. Then he was off and away.

Nature, T'ien T'ung-Hsu had written back in the 8th century A.D., may be compared to a vast ocean. Thousands of millions of changes are taking place in it. Crocodiles and fish are essentially of the same substance as the water in which they live. Man is crowded together with the myriad other things in the Great Changingness, and his nature is one with that of all other natural things. Knowing that I am of the same nature as all other natural things, I know that there is really no separate self, no separate personality, no absolute death and no

absolute life.

Halfway home, we came upon the seagull that did not rise and flee at our approach. It sat high on the beach, legs tucked in, wings tucked in. It seemed unmarked. It was having great trouble breathing. It seemed resigned. It seemed prepared.

We crouched and talked to the seagull and to each other. Vince asked if there was anything we could do and I told him I didn't think so.

I remembered a lifetime ago when we found a dog hidden away in the thick bushes and we kept dragging it out and the dog kept crawling back in. One of the Old Grandfathers told us finally that the dog knew what it was doing and to let it die in peace.

We walked away and kept looking back until we could no longer make out the gull. Then we looked straight ahead.