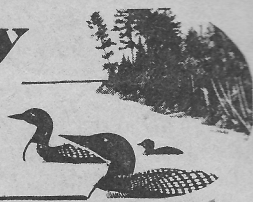


# North Country notebook

by George Vukelich

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## The concrete glacier

**WE WERE DRIVING** south on I-94 in the Wisconsin dawn, heading for the Racine harbor, passing through miles and miles and miles of the commercial and residential sprawl that surrounds the Greater Milwaukee complex.

It felt, suddenly, as it always feels these days, like an alien country. A strange and hostile place. A land under siege.

The gargantuan high-tension wire towers marched across the landscape like some relentless, invincible invading army, dwarfing everything in the human scale.

The howling columns of trailer-trucks moved like mammoth frenzied animals caught up in some terrifying stampede.

The endless fingers of stone and steel reached everywhere, crusting over everything in a glacier of concrete.

**LOREN EISELEY** had indeed hit it on the head when he called us "The World Eaters."

That's what we are doing, paisan. We are eating the natural world and like sightless worms boring through the soil, we too are leaving castings in our wake. But our castings are not easily recycled. They are not easily digested by anybody. They are mostly plastic.

A long time ago, Ernest Hemingway wrote in *Green Hills of Africa*:

*A continent ages quickly once we come. The natives live in harmony with it. But the foreigner destroys, cuts down the trees, drains the water, so that the water supply is altered and in a short time the soil, once the sod is turned under, is cropped out and, next, it starts to blow away as it has blown away in every old country and as I had seen it start to blow away in Canada. The earth gets tired of being exploited. A country wears out quickly unless man puts back into it all his residue and that of his beasts. When he quits using beasts and uses machines, the earth defeats him quickly. The machine can't reproduce, nor does it fertilize the soil, and it eats what he cannot raise. A country was made to be as we found it. We are the intruders and after we are dead we may have ruined it but it will still be there and we don't know what the next changes are. I suppose they all end up like Mongolia.*

**WE WERE DRIVING** along the fringes of West Allis now.

I was seven years old when we moved here to live on 69th and Greenfield, and even then the Old Man would take me fishing out to the surrounding lakes: Pewaukee, Tichigan and what he felt was the treacherous Wind. Also Big Muskego. Little Muskego. And even Lake Denoon.

We always fished Pewaukee for the big dark bluegills in 40 feet of water with hand lines. We would fish them off the bottom using helgrammites, keeping the bait moving by raising and lowering our forearms with a lot of wrist action.

Then we brought them up, hand over hand, just like cod fishermen.

**FOR HOURS ON** end in those hazy, muggy Wisconsin days, I would pretend that I was a young doryman on the Grand Banks, but I never told the Old Man.

What I particularly remember about all those auto trips back then was how quickly we were out of the city and into the countryside and how all the farmers worked their fields not with tractors and machines, but with teams of horses.

When we did see a tractor, the Old Man would slow down and we'd gawk a little. I can even remember the Old Man making the same observation about fertilizer that Hemingway made later, and Hemingway turned out to be a lot more circumspect.

**THE SUBURBS** were sailing past now, flying polaroid prints: Picture windows and tubular swimming pools. Barbeque grills and flashy ski-boats cradled in substantial trailers.

And all the expensive little cars named after animals that are on the very brink of extinction.

I asked Resch if he could live here and he said, well, there were worse places. Tokyo, for one. He also said that Madison wasn't this bad yet, but it was "almost getting there."

And then we were driving along the fringes of south Milwaukee.

It was here that I was born and raised, in what is now called an extended family.

**MY GRANDFATHER** Vincent and my grandmother Julia are both buried here in one of the little green patches the glacier hasn't reached yet, and the memories rise from the past like startled birds from their roosting tree.

Tata Vincent could place a pinch

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of soil on his tongue and taste it and tell you what it needed to grow things in it.

Baba Jula would slit the throats of two white chickens every Easter season, catch their blood in a cup and mark crosses in red over all the doorways in the house to ward off the evil spirits. Until I got to high school, I thought everybody did that.

Tata, Tata. Baba, Baba. The boyhood words come flooding back through a thin, thin crack in the long-locked door of memory.

**I THINK WE** are not supposed to open that door. I think we are not supposed to want them back or call them back or hold them here in any way.

There are too many machines in this place. The horses are all gone. The toilets are all inside. What would they do here?

But Tata. Baba. What will our children do here now that our soil is sour and our land is possessed by the evil spirits?

Where are we going, I kept asking myself over and over. *Where in the hell are we going?* And where are we taking the Americanized descendants of all the Tatas and the Babas of this world?

It wasn't exactly an omen from heaven, but a partial answer came flashing by on the very next roadsign we passed.

*Racine*, the roadsign said. *Racine, Wisconsin*