

BETWEEN ISLANDS

Bob Grunst, award winner

BANGING RAIN PIPES, rapping branches, the 'shooshing' slap-shots of big gusts skidding between Basswood Island and the main shore—the unsettled weather of May. It sounds like hockey practice outside the house. When the wind goes down with the sun here on the peninsula, odds are it will find its prime again as the sun rises. It is mid-week, a Wednesday, and stocktakers in the wind-axiom, such as they are, can keep their confidences.

No one will go on the lake today. Most of the fishermen are still downtown placing after breakfast bets on tomorrow. Though most agree you can't bank on what's coming next, there's the standard response. You accept it, hope for better luck next day, and adjust to circumstances if circumstances permit. Dwelling on particulars that can't be settled involves indulgence and wasted time. With nothing to get your feet on, the logic seems to be, where can you get? Nevertheless, winds come up. Everyone has to deal with the interims. No one holds patents to what the weather draws up, and at breakfast no fisherman's complaint adds up to any measurable good.

Up here winter still has a stake in the month. You get northwesterners wheeling in over the lake—cold air from Canada and beyond. You get southwesterners cowing in thaw-wind from the prairies. When the differences collide, the three day blows let loose. The bottom of the lake—waterlogged branches and stumps, sedges and reeds that come from the rivers, seaweed and moss, and things of doubtful origin and form—gets up and reels and churns and spins. If the fishermen happen to have gillnets in the wrong places when the big winds come, the nets catch the wild salad. The garnished and dishevelled messes they get, fishermen sometimes find hard to explain. Like bunches of porcupines, the nets come up. No one knows where the wrong places might turn out to be; though, veterans can cite locations of holes that seem to attract things by some mysterious force.

The fishermen have to cut the quilly twine out. Starting over again, down their basements or in their sheds, nothing between the maitres (the two master lines), they string in new twine phrase by phrase. The new nets are like blank slates.

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Downtown they like to go after me. What kind of fisherman am I anyway? When will I get straightened out? Will I move up to Bayfield for good one of these years? Wouldn't the red house up Catholic hill be an ideal location? I could watch the islands, all the Apostles, year round. Do I really expect to support a family by collecting "fish stories" and giving them to journals? For them the questions relieve unsettled feelings my departures and arrivals create. It is as if I come from nowhere; their islands, their fish, their vessels give me form. People in Bayfield like you to declare yourself one way or another. Such is the practice around town. Men work in the woods, they drive trucks, they cook and tend bar, they grow apples and strawberries, they have permanent addresses—box numbers at the post office, little brass doors. Some of them have known their combinations for decades. They have boats in their names, and the documentation papers list their tonnages, gross and net. The papers list lengths and breadths and depths. Wood or steel. Diesel power or gasoline. Some of the local tugs are so heavy the marina's hoist can barely lift them. On days like today the questions they would be apt to ask me would get their minds off what might be happening to their gear in the lake.

They don't expect straight answers from me. As far as I know this morning, there aren't any straight ones. They would persist, but it's persistence I'll need right here to get to the bottom of the pan I've scorched oatmeal in. Meanwhile, the wind frays the flag raised on the pier; no one's closer to deriving a formula to tell why, and who will and won't get quills; there's the hodge-podge of dishes I could wash right here in the sink.

The fishermen sit. At Maggie's and on the waterfront at the Pier the waitresses go about their routines. They go exactly. The cooks and the washers stay behind the scenes—cooking and washing. The bakers bring out fresh trays—toppings still steaming, orderly rows. In the boatyard down the street, the halyards on the sailboats, those which haven't been properly wrapped, ring on the masts. The ringing, for non-sailors, sounds quaint. For those in the know, however, it is an unstylish sign, a sign of carelessness. Because they are not fishing, it's turbulent sitting the commercial fishermen do. One by one the bettors take up twitching, and they leave. Penance is not knowing what they'll get. What is worse is finding their worst expectations. In spite of their choice of vocation, they like clear commitments, conclusions, and well defined points.

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Once when I was driving on the road between Cornucopia and

Bayfield, along the peninsula's coast, a bear walked out of a ditch, stood up, and, as if by routine, looked both ways before crossing the blacktop. Around here, bears are practically commonplace. The Red Cliff dump is a famous bear-watching site. Black bears rummage through the bags and sacks. They are familiar and persnickety about their shopping, and people who drive in at dusk for the show don't bother them much. When the headlights come on, the diners wave thanks for the favor.

You don't think of bears as great swimmers though. There are land-bears and land-bears that slap fish in rivers, but bears are not distance swimmers. Wisconsin bears come all of a type; they get stuck with stew cans on their noses and stumble around—spectators' delights.

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I was aboard Cecil Peterson's boat, steering back to Bayfield from the reefs between Outer Island and North Twin. The bottom of the lake had been up for grabs for days, and the nets had been a mess. Fishermen's fingers take the jabbing when they get loads of junk. Peterson's nets had caught wire grass and clinkers too. During the steamboat days the coal passers raked the fires and shot all the prizes overboard. Now the gillnetters bring them up, cold and with edges like glass. On the reefs there still had been plenty of wind. The boat lay in the troughs, and no one felt a bit like joking around. The cartilage in your knees absorbs the rolling, and after enough, the cartilage gives in. What's under the caps aches. Fingers begin to puff and sting. Places you've never noticed existed make themselves felt. I was keeping the course and thinking about what I felt.

There are several men in town with one or two bad trips for experience who won't hesitate to assert that working on the lake is suited only for loons and scaups. Take nothing for granted on the lake, they say. They go on, quite self-assured, and they know it. They're bonded with confidence. The way they talk, theirs is the only way to proceed, and when you're not so sure yourself, almost any confidence can exert a pull. It's safe to guess, at any rate, that hands and knees that stay ashore are none the worse for a commanding prejudice against picking bushels of wire grass and used up coal and trampolining all day on a steel deck.

Deadheads bob up often among the islands, trees that drop into the lake off undermined banks. Collisions with inshore boulders and shoals break the branches off; the chaffing peels the bark off the trunks; the logs go coasting then among the Apostle Islands. Night and day, cruising sailboats can meet them. The heads put the boats

into marinas' slings. They mean big bills for glass work—fiber patches and coats of epoxy—when with what might just as well be premeditated timing, a deadhead butts a hull, exactly stoving in its skin. A commercial fisherman, not watching what's ahead, could lose his wheel or tear off his rudder. Either case would mean several hundred dollars lost for replacement parts and repairs, and the word would get around. Men off the other boats would show to size up the damage and, by the signs, to picture the log. A waterlogged basswood An old, black torpedo of oak A tamarack trunk blown across from Grand Marais, Minnesota That solved they could begin revising, if necessary, their estimates of the man whose luck it was to have been steering.

Though there are laws on the marine operators' books prohibiting ore carriers from dumping refuse into the lakes, lots of those twenty gallon drums turn up too, drums that start out packed with heavy lubricating grease and stowed in engineroom lockers. Filling and rolling bottoms-up after a lift out a gangway, with just enough air-space jammed up at the drum's sealed end, the drum might drift for weeks.

Crates turn up and worn-out fish boxes. Balloons with children's names and addresses riding inside with the names of elementary schools—Washington, Adams, Jefferson, Madison . . . turn up. Derelict buoys turn up. In the right light, a pair of juvenile seagulls can appear just as black as a black bear.

Since I like to steer, Peterson and Larry Soulier, the regular hired man, had found places to stretch out and sleep. Peterson had been mumbling to himself half the day. Soulier had been mumbling. About the trash in the nets and the trampolining The course back to Bayfield from the banks off Outer Island takes a tug around the south end of Cat Island. Anderson Island, or Presque Isle, lies to the south. In the passage then, Ironwood comes, then comes Manitou (Presque Isle still to the south . . .) then, still steering WSW, comes Oak Island to the starboard and Wilson to port. Then comes Basswood and the West Channel and the mainland.

Inside the islands the wind dropped. It was sunny—barometer rising and just enough breeze taking the cut to kick up little white caps. I saw the bear from a distance, or not the bear, but herring gulls twisting around about something. Because bears are not distance swimmers, it could not be a bear.

The gulls swooped down. They gyred up. They were after something, which might have been a big, bloated ciscoette, a fat trout someone aboard another boat had thrown away because it was too big to sell to Bodin. The idea of delicacies agitates gulls. When they're

agitated and hopelessly fighting for firsts, firsts and all sense of order gets knocked loose like secondary feathers and down. Gulls get flabbergasted. In disorder, they forget what it is they are after.

It was not a bloated ciscoette, and not a deadhead, and not an empty grease drum. They could do nothing about what it was, and that upset the gulls. I did not holler, Look! There's a bear! waking the men, because they were tired and sore and I was not sure at first. I got the glasses. The tug, running on the gait, got closer.

There is a nob on the northwest end of Presque Isle/Anderson, and maybe the bear started from there because the early campers had begun to make noise at the sites at Quarry Bay and Anderson's Point. Bears that have not been assimilated into the social structure of blacktops and dumps are not sociable bears. Blacktops and dumps are banned on all the islands but Madeline.

Whether the bear was sure about where it was going or not, it was going, swimming in the passage between Presque Isle's northwesterly nob and Manitou. The passage is better than two miles wide, and the current is always fast in the squeeze between shores. Whether the bear was sure or not about why it was swimming, the bear swam. The bear swam and as I acknowledged to myself that it was a bear, I felt the desire to stop the reasoning, to forget the possible effects of noise at Anderson's Point, to just let the bear go or to let go of the it With the current dragging against it the bear swam. White caps slapped over the black bear's shoulders and head.

The big glasses hurt my eyes. The gulls had the timing; they braked; and they clipped at the hair rolling with the fat, undulating roll of its shoulders. Head and shoulders were all there was of the bear. The bear had its rhythm. Intent upon its rhythm and Manitou's shoreline, that slid at fault with the current, the bear, for all I could see, declined to notice the gulls. The gulls griped. The gulls cried their proprietors' cries. The trouble had them unsettled and upset. They tugged tufts of black hair loose and tripped themselves up in the air trying to compensate for the loss of place when the hair came free.

Maybe the bear was going by instinct, all fours clawing, all the hollow, insulating hairs contributing buoyancy. The bear swam for Manitou. With their natural license, the gulls were indignant. The bear swam. And for fear of hearing the range of possibilities reduced, I let the others sleep. I did not want an explanation. The bear was swimming for Manitou because Manitou happened to be there. The bear had nothing to do with the names of islands anyway. I let the others sleep.

The bear swam between islands. The fat roll of flesh rolled up and back. Never closer than a quarter mile from the bear and the

protesting gulls, I steered off, aiming the bow at the north end of Basswood. There is a certain projection of stone. Maybe where it was going the bear needed something only a bear can find if it has oldtime bear wits. Maybe because of the force and declension of the current, the bear had to settle for a landing on Oak. It did not take long to lose sight of the bear.

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Around lunch time the fishermen will start showing up again at the counters and place settings downtown. They'll sit and they'll stew and they'll worry they're getting nowhere fast. The uniformed help will be busy. Behind the scenes will be busy. The specials of the day, white recipe cards clipped to the regular menus, will be popular bets. Someone's usually serving chowder or stew.

The hardest winds blow-cork around noon. They're unsettling when they come through. The flagpole lanyard and the unanimous unwrapped halyards delinquently ring. I could go downtown and present myself as a point for a little good-natured growling, such as good-natured is; though I admit, I'm not so altruistic as to consciously stroll in for the baiting. And I'm no natural at staging such things.

The men hunker into their favorite places as if to anchor themselves against the drift. I could stay here and do something about the mess in the sink. I could go for a walk out back, up between the hills. It is far too cold for swimming.

Downtown, picking up their spoons before stirring their broth, one or two of the fishermen, animated by an unpremeditated ursine whim, will wipe out the spoon-shine with a stroke of a thumb.

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