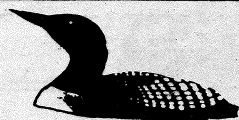


North Country Notebook



George Vukelich

Every time I go walking the woods with Marion Moran I get the same feeling I used to get back in parochial school when the Seven-Foot Nun would keep Charlie Kaiser and me after class to make sure we weren't falling too far behind our peer group in the pursuit of excellence.

"You have to respect her," Charlie would say of our dedicated teacher. "She knows more than God."

Her knowledge was awesome, and while a lot of it came from books, a lot of it didn't. It always amazed us that she knew so much about stuff that we figured she wasn't supposed to know about. She was supposed to know Latin, but she wasn't supposed to know how to hit Clarence Lopac's best pitches, which she did with a cowed, peekaboo stance that reminded you of Stan Musial.

It was particularly unnerving when Clarence was fanning the rest of us on the same pitches she was nailing.

"Whattaya gonna do," Clarence would shrug, "with someone who hits wearing a rosary?"

Marion Moran has that same aura as she hikes around the Wisconsin countryside with her popular all-season, all-weather "Walks on the Wild Side" classes offered through the UW-Extension. She is simply one of the best naturalists around. To walk with her is not only an education but a privilege.

We walked the woods the other day, and I kept thinking how much Charlie Kaiser would have loved it. Not to mention Steady Eddy, Hugo Percy or James Gaius Watt.

Marion says she loves the winter woods because in the snow, "it's like reading an open book."

It is if you know the language. Otherwise the scratchings and trackings are just a melange of hieroglyphics, mysterious as a computer microchip on a Scrabble board.

Marion also loves to stop at certain scratchings and trackings, survey them in silence and then ask: "What happened here?"

Every time she asks that, it reminds me of Maxine Kumin's poem "The Presence," and words tinkle in the frozen landscape like wind chimes.

Something went crabwise across the snow this morning, Maxine Kumin wrote.

Something went hard and slow over our hayfield.

It could have been a raccoon lugging a knapsack,

It could have been a porcupine carrying a tennis racket,

it could have been something supple as a red fox

dragging the squawk and spatter of a crippled woodcock.

Ten knuckles underground those bones are seeds now

*pure as baby teeth
lined up in the burrow.
I cross on snowshoes
cunningly woven from
the skin and sinews of
something else that went before.*

After Marion stops you often enough and gets you to looking long enough before you answer, you find yourself viewing the tableau in front of you the way a detective views a crime scene. Then it becomes an addiction, like working crosswords or equations. Then you find yourself praying for more snow and longer winters.

The ability to bounce back, Steady Eddy likes to point out, is often discovered in a rubber room.

The rabbit tracks are no longer random craziness, but an unspooling record of night travels as accurate and complete as a piece of film shot in infrared.

You see now the leisurely trail pace with no danger perceived.

You see now the 45-degree cuts where the rabbit fed on the sumac stems, the cuts as clean as blade-made.

You see now the rabbit of the past night, still present in the daylight.

Knowledge has brought a whole new dimension to your mind's eye. The scene is a hologram. And you are now seeing around corners.

The next time Marion stops, the rabbit tracks and the rabbit pellets take you only so far. You stand there in the snow, not entirely dumb, just mute. Now, you do not understand what is in front of you, let alone what is around the corner. *A rabbit was here...and then...and then?*

Marion waits the way the Seven-Foot Nun always waited. Did she know about holograms way back then? Was that why she asked you if you got the picture, if you were seeing it?

Marion points out the delicate tracery, fanlike near a depression in the snow. You guess Owl then. Wing marks. She says Owl, tail mark. She doesn't think the wings ever touched. She says it's circumstantial. No blood. No fur. No struggle. It's as though the rabbit stepped into an elevator. And...left.

They hurt no one, William Stafford had said of others like this one. They rove the North. Owning the wilderness, They're not lost. They couple in joy; in fear, they run. Old, their lives move still the same—all a pattern across the land, one step, one breath, one...

Winter bundles them close; their fur bunches together in friendly storms. Everything cold can teach, they learn. They stand together. The future comes.

Trees rub and squeak in the wind. No other lives are moving.