

Blasted Pine Island

What made this island special, different from the other little islands in Salmon Lake, Montana, was that it had a blasted pine. When we paddled there (the lake as still as ice), we found the remains of a fire, ringed with blackened stone, the bones of a deer, hide still clinging to them. Had it wandered here in the winter time when Salmon Lake was frozen? What was its private drama? Had humans caught it and butchered it? One of the femurs rested under the water that lapped peacefully at the western shore. In my fanciful mind I dreamed of the Montana natives, building a fire, rowing as we did to this sacred place. Teenagers had probably built that fire, but no: I could see him in my inner eye, standing there, moccasined, watching us with guarded bemusement.

Blasted Pine Island was no bigger than an everyday living room, but a hill rose up in the middle of it; the twisted arms of a manzanita-like conifer snarled around it at the southern edge, and the blasted pine itself stood at the west, its one arm pointing emphatically to the north. Blasted is the word that best describes it: it seemed to have survived lightning, and it looked like it was endlessly cursing. Fire had hollowed it out: its insides opened up to you at the top, glistening with shiny black charcoal, dark as obsidian. It had empty windows, like eyes. It had a short right hand that grasped upward and a long left arm that snaked out to the north, looping wildly as if in imitation of the bolt that struck it. "It came from there," it seemed to say, indicating the over-forested hill and whatever was beyond it. "You have to go there."

On the eastern bank is a stony little beach, and that's where we dragged our canoe up and tied it and laid the paddles down. That's where we found the remnants of a fire. That's where we found the bones, the one on the hill, picked clean by ants. The other, under the water. Steven and I sat and drew.

Steven drew me drawing the blasted pine. Sun was so bright on my arm I had to cover it with the sleeve of my sweater. Beetles crawled over my feet. Butterflies fluttered around the great magenta flowers that cover this landscape. But the blasted pine could never be adequately represented. I tried my first pencil, harder and shinier than I liked it, and the top of my drawn tree was dwarfed by its swollen abdomen. The page wasn't big enough. I scooted under the tree, and looked up till my neck got stiff. Blasted Pine would not be captured in its entirety. The surface of the pine itself, a structure of minute snaking lines broken by mysterious openings, was as smooth and as tan as stone. It was a tree that had been flayed of its bark. Its innards had become basalt, as though it had swallowed fire. I could never get

the reality of that arm. The man crouched down and watched me. He pointed to the north. No, I said, we will be heading home.

And then the wind came up. It had been a still and pleasant summer day, and a wind came up out of the west. It picked up speed and force and magnified its voice in the leaves of the trees on Blasted Pine Island. Steven stood in the face of the wind on the top of the hill and I drew him all-a-flutter, his hair and his denim shirt and the cloth of his pants racing and rippling in vain to get away from him. I said, it'll be difficult to paddle up wind to the lodge. Let's wait for it to die down. It didn't. The lake had gone from glassy stillness to little breakers breaking on the west bank of the island. Waves as high as your thighs were rearing up, all the water was being pressed to the east. Should we flag down a motorboat? None to be seen. We got in the canoe, foolishly thinking that we were stronger than wind and water. We paddled out in our little boats like native Americans only without the muscle power to make a difference and I thought of him grinning as he crouched there and observed. We paddled and paddled, the canoe heaving and bobbing over the rapid waves, and the island stayed in the same place, just north of us. Then it got ahead of us. We were backing up. We bent into our paddling with a desperation that only fear of drowning--or losing your precious drawings--gives to a couple of landlubbers, and using the island itself as a haven from the wind, we were able to get back to the eastern bank. Back to the blackened firepit and the deer bones...no longer quite so picturesque, something a little dangerous.

The days was sinking. Steven, his face red with the sunset, bent more forcefully into the wind, arms waving at the darkening lodge. We waved both paddles at every distant boat, halloped until our voices were hoarse. We had no cellphones, you see, because this was before cell phones, this was before all that chat that comes over the air waves. Only ears and eyes could hear and see us, and at last someone halloped back and rumbled over. And as we motored back in the choppy waves, our canoe bobbing in resignation behind us, I turned back and watched him, a distant figure. "It came from there," said the shaking arm of the blasted pine, pointing to the north. "You must go there." But we were going west.