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Islands on the Wabash

> *They dot the river and diversify it—and in the fruition of the leafy season when the stream is low, and free from sedimentary disturbance, the glassy surface, with the reflected surroundings, gives a fairy like landscape, where sprites may love to dwell.*
> —*George Winter* Manuscripts

Late summer brings low water to the Wabash River as it flows through Indiana. Provided the year has passed without too much flooding, the banks green up nicely, clothing themselves in grasses, sedges, smartweeds, cockleburs, amaranth, and the like—the natives and non-natives all thrown together in a heady tangle. Gravel bars emerge at the mouths of tributaries, and sandy headlands grow wide at the upstream points of all the islands. Summer rains wash the sands and gravels clean, and they flush with willow and cottonwood seedlings in countless numbers, all destined for a swift demise under the fall rise.

Shorebirds that summer to the north will be moving south again, gathering on the low exposures to rest and feed. The Greater and Lesser Yellowlegs arrive to dash after small fish in the shallows. Sandpipers join in: the Pectoral, the Solitary, the Spotted, and the Least. Double-crested Cormorants return from the Great Lakes and beyond, fishing along the way with humble nonchalance, while overhead the lanky Ospreys pass through with magisterial ease. The Great Blue Herons, of course; they have been here all along. But the siblings of the year, once inseparable, have become increasingly solitary and take to haunting lonely and distant claims along the shores.

On the middle reaches of the Wabash, low-water often confines powerboats to isolated stretches and leaves the river more inviolate for someone like me who yearns to escape engines of all kinds. Even

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in a kayak I sometimes ground in the riffles and climb out to walk the boat over tawny gravels. With the sun long past its zenith, the incandescent light of midsummer gives way to something thinner, almost silver, while mornings and evenings take on a clean and golden hue. For all these reasons I find the Wabash at its best this time of year. Despite all the abuse the river has endured, at certain times and places I consider it openly beautiful, so these are the months I set out to visit the islands.

I don't know how many islands are left on the Wabash. A few dozen perhaps. Originally there were a great number of them, but the smaller ones quickly disappeared when settlement entered the land. Forests were cleared, wetlands drained, prairies plowed, and Indiana's boondoggle canals were built. Even the beaver dams were (still are) dynamited to clear the tributaries. As a result, the watershed lost its tremendous capacity to absorb and slowly release water like a great flywheel. Instead, the water ran off in muddy freshets that inundated and eroded the islands. So rapid were these changes that by the mid-nineteenth century George Winter—a local pioneer painter best known for his portraits of the Potawatomi and Miami Indians just prior to their removal—observed and sketched five such islands as they washed away on a single mile of river. Of those remaining, none that I have visited are now used for anything, though evidence of past use turns up in the form of rusty horse shoes, antique bottles, abandoned clearings, and the occasional dump site. Some of the islands harbor curious local histories, but I've made little effort to uncover such things. I visit for other reasons.

This morning I'm headed downriver for a night on an island in one of my favorite haunts, a fairly isolated stretch about fifteen river miles away. Four islands nestle there, and in my imagination the stretch has become the river's heart. Others know the place as well as I, but here in low-water season few try to get there by powerboat, a fact which means, fortunately enough, that very few try to get there at all. I push away from shore and the Wabash current snags the bow and turns me downstream to face the city of Lafayette. It's the first thing I come to, the city in which I've lived for a decade. From the water, I see the courthouse rotunda jutting above the bank because the trees have just been cut down on that side and replaced by limestone riprap. I think the chamber of commerce had a hand in it. Maybe the cityscape looks better on the website that way, more controlled and somehow less frowzy. These days we seem to like our rivers mostly in the abstract, and we don't much care for that typically messy interface known as a riverbank.

I glide beneath the downtown bridges still freighted with morning traffic. It's just another workday up there for the commuters, but a lucky day adrift for me. Past the bridges, just south of downtown, I pass the sewage treatment outflows gushing from both banks and sharp with the smell of chlorine. The discharge is far clearer than the river, and before it mixes with the current a band of water runs along within which I can see every stone on the riverbed.

Three miles down sits the last of the city's factories, a giant pharmaceutical plant of 130 buildings on 500 acres that looms and booms over the river. Antibiotics used prophylactically in the beef, pork, and poultry industries ("efficiency generating products" according to the website) are manufactured there, and by the sound of it in huge quantities. Beyond this factory, however, and having traveled just four miles, the city quiets behind me, the sound of engines fades. I have always judged a city by how long it takes to get out of it—the shorter the better—and this one is still fairly easy to escape, though of course it gets a little harder every year like most places. No matter what, a river will always escape a city more quickly than a road because ten feet out from any shore you can shrug off the bulk of it.

Though once a commercial thoroughfare, the Wabash is no longer connected in any meaningful way to the world buzzing on its banks. Only a scrap of commercial fishing remains, and a ban continues on the harvest of freshwater mussels because populations of commercial species are severly depressed, while other species are endangered and possibly headed for a slow extinction. Once, these Wabash mussels provided freshwater pearls and mother-of-pearl buttons of considerable fame, but more recently they had only been ground up to seed pearl oysters, a use which strikes me as cheap and savage in any case. In all, the Wabash is too small for barge traffic, too ugly for tourists, and neglected by Indiana's politicians and most of its residents. It wanders like a brown scar across the northern half of the state before sinking southward to perform its most definitive service as the state's meandering western border.

As I ply a lazy westward reach, the world settles and quiets around me. Most of my day-to-day concerns are behind me, landlocked in that other world. It seems the moment I push away from shore, the landed world and I part company in some fundamental ways. I have only my boat and provisions, with no ready access to the rest of my life or the world at large. And in late summer, without the fishermen and the powerboats, I often have the river to myself for days on end. Nothing but reach upon forgotten reach for as long as I care to travel.

And I do like traveling in a boat. I like the jaunty independence and the dilatory pace. The scene changes slowly and the view round

each bend opens with a majestic, almost a geologic, kind of patience. Behind me a lazy wake, a mere ripple, spreads wide to meet the shores. Each stroke of the paddle releases twin eddies that suck back into themselves like a scroll before vanishing. The world becomes large and accommodating, while I and my kayak become small and innocuous. It's a good fit.

I named this boat "The Green Darner" after the common dragonfly, because the hull is skinny as that insect's abdomen and colored olive drab like its thorax. I sometimes think the paddle pivots around me like the beating of a dragonfly's wings. Even the dipping blades remind me of a dragonfly depositing her eggs. I have been on the river when it was quiet enough to hear this. She flies close to the water, releasing each egg by tapping the surface with her tail. The sound is a tiny "pit ... pit ... pit," and I often try to make my own paddle strokes as simple and unobtrusive as that.

Passing the Wea Plain now. Two centuries ago the Wea tribe had a village on the banks along here and by all accounts the place was lovely. An early settler named Sandford C. Cox remembered it being described as "'the prettiest place this side of Heaven,'—a fact which has never been disputed by any one who ever saw it." These days, however, the Wea Plain is mostly fields of corn and soybeans. I have just passed the mouth of Wea Creek which meanders down through the plain. Thanks to a local aluminum factory, this creek will be full of PCBs for a long time to come, and all the fish that live there will be too poisonous to eat. Among others, eagles and ospreys will be eating them anyway, since they don't have a choice or a voice in the matter. But there's little point in becoming elegiac about it. I don't want this trip to become a sour travelogue or a panorama of loss. The fact is I never knew this or any other midwestern river to be anything more than it is right now. I can scarcely imagine the original beauty or the insults it has endured. All I really know is that, despite everything, this river still flows.

In the morning, unprecedented things can be expected on a river. It's a rare trip that doesn't reveal something I would not have imagined otherwise. This morning I come upon a heron that must have died just hours ago in the predawn darkness. Drawing the boat close, I lift the body from the shallows, surprised as always by how small birds become up close and in person. One foot is sunk deep in the sand, so the bird had been standing here on one leg at the moment of death. I tug the toes free, looking the bird over from side to side, but find no obvious cause of death. The eyes are wide open and the golden irises still fresh and bright. I have often felt transfixed by the fierce stare of herons, as if I stood accused of trespass by this representative of the river, or as

if I had suddenly become the bird's chosen prey. Through these sharp eyes the heron saw the river at an angle and intensity I can't know. I stretch out a wing and pluck the longest flight feather to wear in my hat, then I release the body and the current takes it down.

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A strange sense of oblivion sometimes enters my journeys on this river—especially in early summer when the sun beats overhead and the river incandesces in that olive-brown and opaque way it has. At such times the Wabash is simply too big to feel intimate or intricate the way many of its tributaries do, and on mile-long reaches a sort of blankness creeps into the scene and robs it of its depth. The paddle goes in and disappears at a depth of one foot, rarely more. Sometimes the river below is only two feet deep, and sometimes it is deeper than I can fathom with a paddle over seven feet long. Mostly I can't tell the difference. Secrets live in the depths, modes of life that one learns about mostly in books or gasping at the end of hooks. On those days the water's surface turns vaguely repellant and my boat floats lightly like a discarded soda can. The reaches seem endless and the bends never come. The world looms huge and blunt and I often feel nearly paralyzed in the midst of it.

My own history compounds this sensation because, however remotely or incidentally, I have been aware of the Wabash all my life. As a child, my family often drove through this part of the country on visits to distant relatives, and we crossed the river on a bridge I now routinely pass beneath. Always fond of maps, I remember tracing our progress along the numbered interchanges and trying to connect the world outside the car window in some palpable and geographic way to the stripped-down world represented on paper. Here in the flat expanse of midwestern farmland there was almost nothing to connect with except the rivers, and I remember readying myself for glimpses of them through the guardrails as the car sped over a bridge. The view opened suddenly—a reach of winding water, arching trees, snags, maybe a heron—and then it shut down again and the fields marched on. The connection was peripheral and slight, but my strongest memory is of how the rivers all seemed so grand and desolate and lonely. I remember wishing we could stop the car, just for a few minutes, so I could scramble down the bank and hunt for something at the water's edge that I believed would be there.

So it seems fateful and strange that now, by means almost accidental in retrospect, I often travel beneath the bridge I crossed so long ago. When I do I often look up and conjure a lost self hurtling overhead and

glimpsing, however briefly, this same anonymous reach I know so well, or perhaps too well, or maybe not well at all. I try to catch sight of my younger gaze, and sometimes I think I do. Sometimes I feel consigned to that grand anonymity at last, and I think those early, anxious feelings must have been some kind of premonition of my future. I am not alone in being drawn to rivers, but the how and the why of this particular river often defies my every attempt to fathom it.

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Reach upon reach and mile by mile the morning gives way to an afternoon of clean blue skies and dry breezes—the kind of day this part of the country does so well at the end of summer. In no hurry to arrive, I stop often for a bit of shade or some birdwatching. Along the way I have startled some big fish and they in turn have startled me. Carp mostly, maybe some bigmouth buffalofish. One thumped the bottom of my boat in its haste to escape. Another turned tail so fast it splashed me pretty good. Given the water's turbidity, the fish don't see me any better than I see them, and so we surprise each other in this way, with my boat's shadow looming over them before they know it. I have passed just one fellow human, an old man sitting in a lawn chair atop the bank with a fishing pole before him. At my approach he slowly raised a hand and I returned the greeting with a broad sweep of the paddle, but not a word was spoken. We would have had to yell in any case.

Ten miles down, the valley's rim advances on the river and turns it southward. Just around this bend I enter my haunts, my purlieus. The river road turns away to climb out of the valley, and without the road the houses disappear. These next five miles are secluded, well-wooded, and reasonably quiet: the river's guarded heart. Soon the first of the islands, Goose Island, pulls away from the left bank, thick with trees and streamlined as a fish. In the deep shade of the island's outer bank I slip the boat into the calm between two snags and stop for lunch.

While I'm eating, something works down through the thick grass on the bank. It sounds loud as a deer, or even a person, but then a sleek little muskrat plunks in the water without a bit of ceremony. Swimming about, it seems to regard my boat as a new log in the jam, and provided our eyes don't meet it won't recognize me at all. It rounds the side of the boat with a mouthful of green grass, then dives for the entrance to its den which is burrowed in the bank. That's the last I see of it, the hump of its dive and the ripples spreading.

I begin to feel it now: the arrival of river time. A mind will slowly synchronize with the place and the pace it inhabits, and I like what my

mind becomes here on the river. It slows and concentrates, becoming more inclusive and comprehensive. Things on the river come buffered by space and wrapped in time. They come with the regularity of pools and riffles, ordered like beads on a string. They won't be crossed or scattered like things in the city. The river is dynamic and fluid, with the braided threads of its current speeding up and slowing down to match the depth and the terrain. As such it never becomes something discrete or complete, and yet hydrologists speak of a "principle of continuity" and a "principle of least action" to explain how all the variables and all the forces of water in motion will yield a constant. I begin to feel the double nature of water, the stability centered within incalculable motion. It's this stability I embrace, the thread upon which the beads are strung, the banks that hold the flux, the principles implying that all these diverging forces add up to one.

It takes more than a day for a mind to merge with a river. I have no illusion about that. Days, weeks, years—perhaps you never really get to the end of it. But as the afternoon proceeds, some long-submerged currents rise in my mind, if not exactly breaking the surface then at least lurking just below like big, unseen fish. Things are hidden away in me the way that muskrat is hidden in the riverbank. There is a center I commonly lose sight of.

With lunch over I drift on, passing a wide bay in the river where there should be, according to one of my maps, two emergent islands. But these small islands are gone now, and, as low as the water is, I find no evidence of their former existence beyond a little shoaling. It's just a wide spot in the river that looks like a good place to put an island. Next I pass Colliers Island. At a half mile in length, it's the largest of the islands I have visited and home to nesting eagles. Two miles further, and as I round a bend my destination nears. The Fulton Islands loom up to part the river. They must once have been united, but the river—who knows when?—cut a chute through the middle and created twins. These are healthy islands, it seems to me, big enough to hold their own against the river and possibly even grow a little from time to time. Both are densely wooded, and the first one presents a broad, level apron of gravel rising slowly into thick beds of sand that cradle the island's leading edge. The edge is cut sharp like the prow of a ship, with a barricade of flood debris thrown down before it and trees lined up across the top like a stockade. At times of high water, the river and the island have a running battle there, and so far it seems to be a stalemate. Floodwaters scrub off some of the island, but then debris and vegetation trap the sediments to rebuild. Two herons guard the point, and I feel their hard stares upon me from a quarter-mile away. They have me pegged, of course, coming first to attention with heads

raised and a nervous step or two, and then, after a moment's hesitation, launching heavily away. They turn downriver, and their arched wings slowly disappear in the distance.

I ground the kayak on the point and climb out to stretch. It's good to stand up again after hours down at water level, and I stroll about the island with my gaze held high. This is a lovely little island, maybe nine acres in size and gleaming in the sunshine. Up in the sands there's a level spot, a soft clean place to pitch a tent, and a wealth of driftwood lies scattered about should the night turn cold enough for a fire. I find no evidence of recent visitors beyond two rusty cans and a shard of a broken bottle, which is good because I don't really visit the islands to meet people. One has the city for that. When I meet someone out here the lines of force get skewed and the ease of my solitude is strained. My thoughts stop; my writing stops. I might as well admit this much in any case: I am often more of an island person than a people person. One learns to make peace with that.

Along with the usual cottonwood seedlings springing up across the point, I find horse nettle, umbrella sedge, jimsonweed, monkeyflower, smartweed, sneezeweed, knotweed, and wormwood. All those lovely, motley names! The cocklebur has set its burs, and all the tussock grasses have gone to seed. The plants on this landfall are an autumnal mix of vagrants and scouts that stake no claim to permanence. Most have arrived as seeds in a flood, and most will depart the same. As for me, I approve of the site and decide to spend the night.

The late-summer sun remains potent on the river, and hoping to escape it for a while I set a camp chair beneath some breezy silver maples and laze the afternoon away. I have a notebook for my usual scribbling and binoculars for the passing birds. There's an old paperback stowed away in the boat somewhere. It's been in there all summer, but I doubt I'll get to it. I have no goal in mind beyond absorbing myself in the scene and its happenings. These sunny, September afternoons are my favorites of the year, with a drowsy suspension of time and intent in the lingering silver light. A "fruition" as George Winter described it. If a damselfly alights on my knee or wrist, I pause to sketch it as best I can, longing for a way to record the colors—the electric blue of the civil bluets, or the stunning ruby dab, like a drop of bright blood, pressed between the folded, crystalline wings of the American rubyspot.

River time flows deeper now, coursing through me where before, in the boat, I was coursing through it. I have said that river time is more linear and continuous than city time, but it is also surprisingly elastic, like a rubber band stretched through awareness and responding to states of intention and attention and inattention in surprising ways. A watch becomes useless. I look once and wonder where the

time has gone. I look again and swear it must have stopped. Nothing left but to stow it in the boat. The sun is a better timepiece, but at the height of the afternoon even it stalls and dallies in the sky. Out here, as far as I'm concerned, the sun is up or the sun is down and all the rest is quibbling.

But when the sun finally wanders down to meet the trees on the far shore it musters a sense of direction again and river time suddenly tightens. There are day things and there are night things, and at this time of year the transition takes place quickly. My shadow yawns across the sands behind me. In the evening shade the day's heat pours upward like smoke into the deepening blue, and sands cool rapidly underfoot. Before the dew starts falling, I pitch the tent and unroll the sleeping bag. Then I have a bite to eat and put away the gear.

I am not alone in taking the cue. Up and down the river daytime creatures prepare to rest while nighttime creatures wake from a drowse. When the water grows too dark for fishing, one of the cormorants flies swiftly up and down the reach, recruiting a second, then a third, and together they pass before me in search of a roost. They seem hesitant, approaching one likely roost in tight formation before breaking off again to regroup. Two of the three birds have the pale breasts of juveniles and for them all this business of landing safely in treetops must still be fairly new. Getting to a perch is often difficult for these birds, whose webbed feet are so much better suited to swimming. Beyond that, the cormorants are not nuanced fliers. They have only one speed—namely full tilt—and they are stiff and slow to turn. With all the commitment of fighter planes lining up with a carrier's flight deck, they aim for a sycamore on the far shore. On their first attempt, the two juveniles fail miserably and crash down through the branches before circling off to regain the needed altitude. One of them fails a second time, aborting the attempt at the last second and pulling away. On the third attempt all are safely perched, and even I feel relieved. Cormorants always look a little out of place while roosting, like penguins stuck in a tree, but the birds seem comfortable, and use what's left of the light for preening, looking around, waiting.

Somewhere over the far shore the sun has set, and above me the clouds go soft and buttery with yellow and orange. The river doubles the sky, cloud for cloud and color for color, while adding some motion of its own. The trees and banks frame everything in contrasting black. I slowly pace the shoreline, looking up at the sky then down again at my tracks. Some days I absorb a sunset like a stone, while other days, for some reason, I become overly conscious about it and want to thank something for it. Is this a wellspring of religion? We find no reason for a beauty like this, so we imagine a painter to whom some credit is due.

We look for a signature somewhere in the darkening corner. Tonight I decide that, barring further developments, it is enough to be thankful. Here on earth being grateful *for* is plenty, without necessarily having anything to be grateful *to*.

In the fading light the ratcheting cicadas quiet down and the drowsy wooden songs of katydids strike up. Events pass like beads in time:

A pair of barred owls sing to each other across a distant bottomland.

A beaver swims downstream with its blunt head cleaving a wake. I sit motionless, but it spies me anyway, slaps its tail hard on the water, and disappears.

The dew falls fast, dampening my clothes and notebook.

When it's dark, I move out to the point where water runs faintly over the stones and the mosquitoes fear to tread. I bring the camp chair and a blanket to drape against the chill. The river glides by without a hitch or a pause. In the dark the sound of water is a steady murmur.

A fire might fend off the evening damp, but flame is an inward-looking thing that keeps the stars, the owls, and the ghosts themselves at bay. With a fire I turn my back to the world and contract my views. Without one, my thoughts and senses adjust to darkness and venture outward where they belong. From the wet stones beneath my feet to the Milky Way above, nothing is out of place. The trees and the earth have fallen still, or so it seems to a daytime creature such as myself. Over my right shoulder, a screech-owl whinnies.

I am always humbled—and increasingly bemused—by the gauzy depths of the Milky Way (I, who barely know enough of the heavens to stitch together half a dozen constellations). Thanks to light pollution, the Milky Way will never be seen again in the city, but it's reassuring that, for now at least, it's still close enough to paddle to in a day. On the northern horizon a queasy light hangs over the city, but above me and further south I still gather the old light of the stars.

Strings of red-eye flights are passing far above, heading up to Chicago over a hundred miles away or else down to Indianapolis the other way. I see five or six at once from down here, with their marker lights tracing patterns like spokes on a hub. The planes are all intrusions here, reminders of how noisy a species we have become and how busy we are about some often needless things. Suppose one of those planes holds a weary businesswoman who has spent the day marketing a line of greeting cards. Suppose that's all there is to it.

But let them go. Planes and people follow routes of money back to the money's source. I took a different route today, that's all. In its own way, this island is a dark and humble hub, and tonight I'm the only passenger who landed.

On the river at night I become deeply aware of the space surrounding me: both the wide-open airiness of the point, and the low-in-the-valley snugness contained between the banks. The space and the darkness are comforting. Solitude is a comfort. It is so simple and liberating to sit alone on an island in the middle of a river in the dark. My spirit grows large and airy. It floats off to hover in the trees, lingering amid limbs festooned with vibratory insects. Or else it drips down through the gravel like something dark and fluid, running off below the surface to merge with the river. A life seems quite small out here, and a lifetime very short. I feel the borders and limitations—that's security. I feel the absence of borders and limitations and call that eternity. The island harbors both, and the river murmurs both.

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Long before sunrise, I wake to a fogbound world. Stepping out of the tent, I am engulfed in a damp and misty stasis that blots out all the stars. The nearby trees and the river are soft and black, and the space between is all one shade of murky gray. The insects are chilled and quiet. The river is at its quietest now. The planes are down. No car, no truck, no motorcycle profanes the distance. The only thing moving is the river, murmuring over the same stones and around the same snags. Fresh tracks line the shore—raccoon and heron. The river has dropped about one inch in the night.

With kindling kept dry in the tent, I start a small fire and put water on to boil. I sit beside the sharp, young flames and wait for a bed of coals to even out the heat. The damp wood cracks and hisses.

I once came to this river looking for silence. I went upriver and down searching for a place where the engines wouldn't penetrate. I never found one, but these haunts come as close as anyplace around here ever will again, especially at this hour of the morning. I have read that the number of places in America where a person can have even fifteen minutes free from engines is dwindling fast. There's nothing like fifteen minutes of silence around here, but at this hour I can occasionally string together three minutes, maybe four, before a plane or a train breaks in.

Watching the flames, I daydream about a society humane enough to ban engines of all kinds for one day out of the week. It could be Sunday—why not? One day a week when all the cars, trucks, planes, lawnmowers, bulldozers, chainsaws—all of it—would be silenced, and even those who live in the city could walk about and greet each other in peace. A day of rest for the ears and the soul. A day of birdsong and walking conversations.

When the wood burns down to coals it gives off a dry, ovenish kind of heat that drives off the damp and chills. I make some coffee and after a few sips begin to feel my day self stirring and my night self in retreat. With binoculars I check on the cormorants across the river and see them faintly against the night sky. They are awake already, looking around and preening. It's too dark to fish so they are waiting on the sun. I do much the same, musing over the fire and sipping my coffee.

Through the fog, sunrise is nothing definite, but once clear of the horizon the sun shoots a little heat into the valley and gets things moving. The fog becomes restive, wandering ghostlike over the surface of the river for an hour or more before gathering direction and moving slowly upriver. One by one the day creatures emerge and the night creatures recede. On the far shore, a family of raccoons clambers down to drink before retiring for the day. Raccoon families can be wildly dysfunctional this time of year as the adults try to drive off the youngsters and sever family ties before the onset of winter. The parents hiss and growl, snort and bite, while the youngsters, clearly confused by the sudden abuse, can do nothing but cower and beg and whine. Eventually, the two adults go one way, and the three orphans, looking for all the world like downcast cartoon characters, wander off to huddle together in a hollow tree.

Soon a doe and two big fawns step down the bank to drink. They come to the same spot every morning, following their usual trails. They are alert to danger but unhurried, the fawns still young enough to frisk and kick up their heels. After the deer leave, a gray fox comes down to drink. Its gray and rust-red fur shines in the growing morning sun. Then it lopes a long way upriver, scouting the banks for a windfall of food before turning into the woods for its den and sleep.

With enough light to fish, the three cormorants sail out in unison, make a banking descent, and plunk down in the channel. A twenty-second commute that was. They are drifting away down the channel when they dive. They know just where to fish, and it isn't long before one of them comes up with the first silver catch.

The day unfolds like this, with patience and order. One by one the citizens of the night retire, and one by one the denizens of the day awaken. I sense a steadiness in the lives of these creatures. They generally get to work before we humans do, but with none of the rush and bother. What they do is so clearly what they are meant to do, and so well woven into this place, that it could hardly be described as work at all. Very few of us humans enter our daily occupations with a similar ease. I rarely do. At this point in its history our culture does not really support such engagement. Most of us live in one place, work in another, and curse each other in that spaghetti of crossed purposes called a

commute. Altogether we call it a workable system, but I have to say it looks wasteful and demeaning from where I sit this morning.

The fog burns off slowly and the sun's warmth works through a dappled sky. As daylight strengthens, the firelight pales, and I let it go down to ash. The day's first heat stirs up some tentative breezes, and I watch one of them coming upriver like a wave fluttering the cottonwoods along the way. A wave of clapping leaves, moving from tree to tree, approaching slowly.

Here it is now: a modest green applause from the gallery of surrounding trees.

And there it goes: moving slowly away and around the bend.

Very early this morning, before I awoke, a heron paced round the point and crimped the island's edge with tracks. I follow them, now, placing my bare feet atop the four-clawed prints step for step as deliberately as herons do. I pause where the bird paused, and stare down at small fish flickering in the shallows. When I do the moment opens. Everything is placed; everything poised. Focus tight on the fish, but awareness taking in all the periphery. The river up and down. The trees on either bank. A small mussel plowing through the sand beside the fish.

To be successful, a heron must live in a heron-centered world. But the heron is a center of awareness instead of the center of attention. A heron's attention must go out from the center, and what it attends to gives the center both its form and purpose. In the same way, a spider's prey determines the web, and an island is defined by what surrounds it.

I think of the dead heron I found yesterday morning. It stood alone in the night before falling to the water. When it died, the eyes lost focus and the awareness dissolved. Individuals will be dissolved and diffused. The "spirit" I talk so much about—this cloying "I"—will dissipate like the eddies released from my paddle and go cold like the coals in the fire. The spirit is a swirl that animates matter, a flow of energy like a wave traveling through water or a breeze passing through the trees. A life moves through the bodies. We are the orchestrated presence and temporary as music. If we care much about wisdom we revel in life, dote on it, make valiant and foolish attempts to fathom it. In the end we realize that life is mostly unfathomable, and then we go silent for a time. We consider ourselves astronomically lucky just to be. We smile at that and are satisfied.

The heron tracks end right here. Two final prints line up together, and then nothing. I look up at the morning sun with arms spread wide and fingers splayed like flight feathers. There's nothing to do but smile.

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Always a touch of sadness upon leaving an island. With the gear stowed below the hatches, I drag the boat from shore and enter the broad upstream pool. Behind me, the flurry of my footprints in the sand recedes. It looks like I was very busy there at the campsite, scurrying all over the place, but really I wasn't. Or at least it didn't feel that way. In any case a windy afternoon or a downpour will erase my tracks. The sun glints on the wide water above the island, pouring another day of blue skies and silver light. The paddle strokes begin like a welcome morning stretch.

It will be slow going upstream, even on a moderate river like the Wabash. Roughly calculated, fifteen miles against today's current might equal forty stillwater miles, and that's a long haul. But there are pools like beads along the way where I can hide in the slackwater beside the bank and leapfrog past the snags. There are some runs as well, up which I'll have to fight hard to stay even and harder still to make headway. No doubt I'll curse a little when the larger creeks come in—Flint Creek, Wea Creek—and their gravel bars squeeze the river into a fast, arcing flume. At those times, the paddle creaks under the strain, the boat slows to a crawl, and the river, which has an unending supply of water to pile up against the bow, becomes a thing that simply must be fought. In the afternoon, I'll endure the gradual accretion of noise and confusion that makes for a city as experienced from the water. With shoulders aching, I will sigh relief when I reach the bank where I pushed away. My footprints will be right where I left them, probably overwritten by those of a heron.

But now in the morning I linger at the first bend and glance back at the islands standing tall and green in mid-river. Their existence may be something of an accident, geologically speaking, but they seem very indispensable there. George Winter often described the Wabash islands as "thrifty," in an old sense of that word meaning vigorous, vital, and worthy. They are all those things for me. They achieve a genuine presence, almost a life. When I move on, the green curtain of the shoreline closes across the islands and a new scene opens before me. Reach upon reach, mile by mile, this will be the day: the scene before, the scene behind, and the slow and strenuous effort that turns one into the other.