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End Notes of Emily P. Weed

Part of her[1] sat in my parents' basement when I was growing up. A capstan[2] cover with her name and year, in Roman numerals, engraved on it. Hard and concave, like a giant tortoise shell, my brothers and I would play with it, roll it from one side of the room to the other. We were careful not to lift it off the floor because if it dropped on our toes, we somehow knew it would hurt, a lot. We would jump off of it into imaginary waters. Sometimes it was base in a game of tag, or a stool that extended our reach just a little bit higher. I would pretend that my name was Emily. It was part of our furnishings, our belongings, our house—this hunk of metal from an old steamboat, long forgotten. I remember tracing the uneven grooves of the letters with my fingertips, wondering who Emily was, if she were ever alive.

My dad grew up in northern Wisconsin. His grandparents emigrated from Sweden in the 1890s, as did many of the ancestors of the inhabitants of this geographic area. He is an old man now, but when he was a young man, he learned how to scuba dive and would submerge his tanked-up body into unknown waters, murky depths, and under inches of ice. He was an underwater explorer, a treasure hunter, and sometimes, when the local authorities needed help, a body seeker.

My mother grew up in northern Sweden and emigrated in her late twenties. Her uncle had a house in Wisconsin, near Lake Superior, where she stayed before she married my father. After getting married, my mother would go with my father on his scuba diving excursions and watch from shore as he went under the water. She told me that she would hold her breath until he surfaced.

I grew up in west central Wisconsin. In the long summers of childhood, we would drive up to the great lake along state highways 53 and 63. By the time I could walk, I had played in her waters and camped on her shores. The lake seemed more like a sea with glassy waves that crashed and waned, shorelines that stretched beyond borders and horizons. Landscaped by gray granite, green pines, and elusive skies. As a kid, it was better than the ocean because we could splash and swim without the sting of salt in our eyes and on our lips. But we never swam

for long, because like the sea, the water was icy cold. Within minutes our submerged body parts would tingle in revolt, eventually—if we could stand it—becoming numb. We used to make bets on who could stay in the water the longest, but I never won. I was the smallest one, the one with the least resistance.

Before I was born, my father dove into the wreckage of the sunken ship named Emily P. Weed[3], later renamed the Sevona[4], in Lake Superior[5], off the shores of Sand Island[6] and retrieved its capstan cover. He took it home with him and moved it from house to house and eventually put it in the basement of the house he still lives in, where his children would discover it and claim it for their own. And after they were grown and gone, he would donate it to a museum in the recreational center in Little Sand Bay, on the southern shores of the lake.

In the middle of August a few years back, the year my parents celebrated their fiftieth wedding anniversary, we took a weekend road trip up to the lake. My cousin from Sweden, the one I was named after, was staying with my parents at the time. I was visiting with my family, from New York, so it seemed like a good time for an adventure; a good time to revisit the past. And maybe, almost certainly, the last time that all of us could do it together.

We made it to Bayfield in the early afternoon, stopping on the way to visit the grave of our great uncle, my mother's uncle, the one with the house where she used to stay. He died the year I was born and is buried in a cemetery on a hill, with a view of the lake. After checking into our hotel we drove a few miles north, to the campground next to the long defunct fishery in Little Sand Bay, at the northeastern tip of the Bayfield Peninsula, where my parents used to go when they were young, where we used to stay when we were kids, and where the capstan cover, Emily P. Weed, now sat inside a glass case. We walked into the museum in the recreational center, read the dedication that thanked my father for donating it, and walked back out onto the old docks to listen to the hungry gulls calling out their orders to the water below.

My parents walked behind us, slowly, holding onto one another for support. At the end of the bay, the beach curved up into a rocky tree lined peninsula. We walked towards it and went inside the herring shed[7], a long room built on top of a dock. It was no longer in use, but faintly fragrant with the memory of fish guts and salt ingrained in its timbers. This wooden structure shielded half of the bay[8] from the campground and boaters on the other side. I knew this place from the painting that hangs on the wall in my parents' family room, the painting I looked at every day of my childhood, a painting of the bay and the dock and the herring shed. The same shoreline and skyline. Even the birds circling in the sky seemed familiar. I felt like the artist had painted me into the scene—a transient object, but here, in this moment, always. I closed my eyes and inhaled the damp breeze, the beauty and the turbulence of the lake, the shipwrecks[9] underneath the surface, the dead and buried, gently resting not far away. Not far away.

Seeing the secluded water between the curve of the land and the shed, my cousin, my namesake, had a sudden urge to cool off. In an instant, her clothes were on the dock

and she was waist deep in the bay, laughing and catching her breath from the shock of the frigid water. Not bothering to cover her breasts, she jumped up and down, giggling, spinning, and splashing. Twelve years my senior, nearly fifty, as playful and fearless as a child.

"Come in, come with me." She called over her shoulder as she walked out deeper. The sun illuminated her skin, reflecting our shared heritage back at me. I had to squint to get her into focus. Does she look like me? She is part of me. A common element. Her dark hair fell onto her face as she swung her arms in the lucid water. And I thought of a poet, another visitor[11] to these shores long ago:

In every part of every living thing
is stuff that once was rock

In blood the minerals
of the rock

Iron the common element of earth
in rocks and freighters

Sault Sainte Marie—big boats
coal-black and iron-ore-red
topped with what white castlework

The waters working together
internationally
Gulls playing both sides[12]

My parents continued to walk to where the dock met land and they climbed up a hill beyond the beach, unsteady but careful in their footsteps, holding hands as they often did. They sat down on the grassy slope and waved at us. They had sat there before, in another time. They had swum in these waters, in another time. They had been young and uninhibited, in another time. They weren't in a hurry to go anywhere. And neither was I. One quick look to make sure no one was coming our way, and I was in the water too, as naked and alive as the day I was born.

Notes

1 "The Emily P. Weed, now being built at Bay City, will have an electric search light attached to the pilot house, which will be the first of its kind on a lake boat. The Edison people claim that it will disclose a buoy fully a quarter of a mile off on the darkest night, and can be made to penetrate a dense fog to the distance of 1/2 a mile." *Detroit News*: July 15, 1890.

2 "a machine that turns so that rope or a cable can wind around it and move or lift heavy weights (such as a ship's anchor)" *Merriam Webster*

3 "The Emily P. Weed, the large and handsome new steel steamer which arrived here Thursday night on its first trip, left last night for Buffalo with a load of grain which breaks the record of all previous big carriers. Graceful in outlines as a yacht, she steamed out of the river amid cheers with 109,000 bushels of corn aboard, the largest cargo that ever left Chicago." Breaking the Record. *Chicago Daily Tribune*: Aug. 30, 1890.

4 "The steel steamer Sevona, formerly the Emily P. Weed, is under charter to the Anchor Line for the remainder of the present season. The Sevona is now en route to Milwaukee from Sandusky without cargo, and will take on a full load of package freight there." *Milwaukee Library Scrapbook*, May 26, 1900. http://www.maritimehistoryofthegreatlakes.ca/

5 "The largest freshwater lake in the world, one inch of surface water is equal to 553 billion gallons. Superior is the coldest, deepest, and highest in elevation of any of the Great Lakes. Old timers say that Superior doesn't give up her dead. If you go down on Superior, chances are your body will not be found. This is one lake that you need to know what you're doing if you play in her waters." *Lake Superior Fun Facts. Minnesota North Shore Visitors Guide.* http://www.northshoreinfo.com/lakesuperior/

6 "Sand Island is one of the Apostle Islands, in northern Wisconsin, in Lake Superior, and is part of the Apostle Islands National Lakeshore. It is located in the Town of Bayfield in Bayfield County." Wikipedia.

7 "Herring season was a busy and profitable time for Apostle Islands fishermen. Lake herring is a small whitefish that schools together to spawn in the late fall. Tons of herring were harvested using miles of gill net. The Hokensons would lift their gill nets early in the morning, gathering the nets loaded with herring into the Twilite. In the Herring Shed, wives, children, and hired hands awaited their arrival - each with a separate job in the assembly line process. The fish were untangled from the net, rinsed in the wooden tank, gutted and beheaded, rinsed again in the other tank, drip-dried on the rack, salted, and stacked in a barrel." National Park Service. Hokenson Brothers Fishery. *Hokenson Guide 10.*

8 "The trip ashore of the lifeboat was one of terror. All night the men fought with the elements in the effort to reach shore, which was only five miles away, but the wind was carrying the craft parallel with the beach, and it was daylight before the boat was washed up high on shore, at Little Sand Bay. So wearied were the men from their exertions that the boat was nearly swept back into the deep water by the surf." "Sevona's Brave Crew Went Down With Ship: Stood by the Sinking Craft." *New York Times*: Sept 5, 1905.

9 "The bulk carrier Sevona was built in 1890 in Bay City, Michigan, and sank in the waters of the Apostle Islands on September 1, 1905. Today, she sits in 18-20 feet of water on Sand Island Shoals, north of Sand Island. On a quiet evening, the Sevona (previously the Emily P. Weed) left Superior, Wisconsin, for Erie, Pennsylvania, with 6,000 tons of iron ore and 24 crew and passengers. By midnight, calm had turned to full gale. Capt. McDonald altered the Sevona's course, seeking shelter in the Apostle Islands. Confused by heavy rain, fog, and violent seas, he misjudged his position and ran the Sevona hard aground on the Sand Island Shoals. The collision broke the ship in half, making it impossible for the captain and six crewmen to reach their lifeboats. They all perished on a makeshift raft. Seventeen others barely escaped death on two pitching lifeboats." Wisconsin's Maritime Trails. http://www.maritimetrails.org/

11 "Lorine Niedecker (1903-1970) is a twentieth-century, second-wave, Modern American poet often identified with the Objectivists. Living most of her life on the shores of the Rock River near Fort Atkinson, Wisconsin, she is perhaps best known as a poet of place who wrote about the Blackhawk Island that she loved." http://www.lorineniedecker.org/

12 From "Lake Superior." Lorine Neidecker. In The Granite Pail: *The Selected Poems of Lorine Niedecker.* San Francisco: North Point Press 1985.