

Wild Rice | Amanda Gokee

There is a place where wild rice patties grow on expansive waters and blueberry bushes sprout from the cracks in rocky shorelines. The bushes emerge in the space cleared by fires and windstorms that have left young forests of aspen and jack pine in their wake. This is a wild, northern place—over a million acres of wilderness—plenty of opportunities for getting lost in the interconnecting water ways. There are almost no motorized boats here: no houses, no cell-phone service. Today it's called the Boundary Waters because it sits on the border traced between southern Canada and northern Minnesota. On our journey across the country, my family had planned to stop here on our way to Redcliff, Wisconsin. Redcliff is a little reservation on a big lake, Lake Superior, *Gitchigami*. We had embarked on similar trips as a family many times over the years, but this time, I was flying in from abroad, returning from my newly made home in Mexico City.

After traveling by land for many miles, covering the space between the east coast and the Midwest, we put our boats in at Seagull River. I got into the canoe we had lugged across country on the roof of our car and with my younger brother began paddling. We crashed our paddles together at first, uncoordinated, playing, splashing, laughing, but quickly, we began picking up speed, racing our parents who had the advantage of faster and lighter kayaks. We had four arms though. There were moments when our paddles danced. My mom's brother had joined us for this segment of the trip, and he deftly steered his kayak-canoe hybrid.

We had many miles to cover. For three days, we moved from one lake to the next. Some transitions followed a calm stream. Others were eventful, the canoe taking on water in the tiny rapids formed by a mere four-foot elevation difference between one lake and the next. We did one portage, hauling all of our gear and four boats across the one-eighth of a mile that separated Red Rock and Alpine Lake. At the end of the day, my aching arms were proof that we had covered good ground. These days took on an easy rhythm. We paddled in the day, set up a

place to camp in the evening. At night, when the water was calm and the light was low, the reds and oranges of the sinking sun streaked tendrils across the lake. Loons broke the water's surface, calling mournful cries before disappearing again. One night, we shared our campsite with a family of northern flicker woodpeckers, insatiable chicks chirping for more food, indefatigable parents returning with sustenance every half hour.

Wild rice still grows on these northern waters, in spite of US government drainage projects begun in the early 1900s that unsuccessfully sought to transform wetland into farmland. It is contested territory in many ways. Now, there are pipeline projects that pose the constant threat of pollution that can lead to extinction. To this day, my cousin goes out to harvest her own wild rice, and yet things hang in a precarious balance. Water levels are rising, and habitats are changing. Wild rice is a way of life, but no one knows how many more generations it will survive. For now, at least, it is revered.

Back in the car, we traveled down the highway from Grand Marais to Duluth. We had left the Boundary Waters behind and were making our way to Redcliff. I had grown up on this lake in Minnesota; to get to Redcliff we crossed the state border entering Wisconsin and then paralleled the shore of the lake, heading east. The car hummed with the wind as it rushed past the straps that attached our canoe to the roof overhead. We were going to visit my cousin and aunt, and we needed to bring them a gift.

It was my mom who thought of bringing wild rice as a gift for my father's family. My dad immediately agreed, tapping the steering wheel lightly in anticipation. As the miles accumulated beneath us, I wondered if my dad was nervous about seeing his family. To me, it seemed that he had spent a long time avoiding them. Growing up I had only met my paternal cousins a handful of times. The last time we had gone to the reservation, we had only visited the dead, paying our respects to my grandmother at the Catholic cemetery and my grandfather at the traditional burial ground a few miles down the road. We had also visited a yellow house that sagged to one side. My grandmother had

grown up in that house and aunts and uncles and cousins had lived in it at some point in recent history. My father had never lived there. It was a space we orbited around, drawn by its gravitational pull, but always distant. Standing in front of the porch, my father wondered out loud if they still lived there. He did not knock on the door to find out, perhaps out of fear that someone might actually open it and what would he find inside? It is hard to bear witness to the decay of a place. Better not to look.

It was strange to be in a place where so many people shared my last name; for as long as I can remember, people have expected me to explain who I am.

I often wondered what would have happened if my grandmother had not died when I was so young, if I had had the time to get to know her better. I am sure she told me stories when she was watching me as a little girl in Minnesota, but these early memories are slippery, too easily forgotten and lost. I remember how cavernous the Catholic church felt as a four-year-old girl at her funeral. I don't know that I had ever been in a church before that day. In her absence, I turned to my father to tell me stories about who we were, stories I would realize later, he did not know how to tell. Did not feel that he possessed. Did not imagine he had the license to create from scratch. I remember feeling frustrated with him, grasping for things that it seemed he could not provide me with.

I blamed my father, too, my dad told me once, although it is unclear to me what each of us blamed our fathers for. For having lost the stories that we would need to navigate the world? For not having provided the tools to reconcile the violence of the past with that of the present? We were talking around the contours of something that neither of us could properly name. Sometimes, language fails us when we need it most. I had never met my grandfather; he died when my father was still young, and I suppose my father had to become an adult before he felt ready. He joined the army at nineteen, one year after his father died. Like me, my father grew up in many places. At one point, he had briefly considered living on the reservation. He never did. I don't think he felt he belonged there. What I think happened next is that, for a good part of

his life, my father gave up on being an Indian altogether. He became a biologist. He made a good life for himself, for his family, and for me too. He became a devoted husband and then father. He gave me the precious gifts a father gives his daughter. He taught me to be independent, to think for myself, and to never be afraid of setting off on my own.

Have you ever ached for something but you don't even know what it is? In college, I tried filling myself with books. I read and read; I took all the Native American classes I could where, of course, I learned about our oral traditions, and that stories are a precarious thing—always a generation away from being lost. In college, I also learned that trauma can be passed from one generation to the next. I wasn't traumatized by my childhood, but as I learned the history of forced displacement, I understood that the things my father had not found resolution for would also be my own.

As I grew up, though, I started seeing and sensing changes in my father. It is a real possibility that these changes had been underway for much longer, and it was only now that I could feel and identify them. We began talking about things in a different way with new vocabulary. Which is surely part of what had led us there, pulling over to the side of the highway at a roadside grocer in northern Minnesota to buy wild rice. My mom and I dashed in to buy it, as my brother and father awaited us in the car. Driving for several more hours, we finally arrived at my aunt's home. There was a small yard in front of her house, neat and inviting. Getting out of the car, we were all happy to stretch our legs on the brief walk to the front door. My aunt let us in to a bucket of wild blueberries greeting us on the kitchen counter. Wild rice was already being warmed on the stove in anticipation of our visit. Our gift would replenish her stock. We sat down at her table where we began telling each other about who we had been and who we were becoming. Together, we ate.