Bald Eagle Island

The hum of the trolling motor filled my ears as I pulled off my shoes and socks, preparing to leap out and beach the boat. Waves were pushing the fishing boat towards the small, isolated pad of sand surrounded by protruding rock formations, making it hard to keep the boat from bashing into a jagged boulder. I slid myself off of the bow of the boat, being careful not to force it into one of the rocks. My friend Ryan hurled a white rope at me, and I trudged up the beach as Ryan’s mom lifted the trolling motor. Everybody in the boat hopped out making it easier to carry the boat up the patch of sand. Once the boat was far enough out of the water, I hooked the rope around a nearby tree and started surveying the island we had just beached on. The radiance of the sun crept through the overgrown foliage hanging above my head. My back was to the shore and I was staring into the jungle of wildlife that lay ahead of me. I was wearing an old, green 1991 Grateful Dead tour cap that I had bought earlier in the summer and a faded green and blue tie dye shirt I made before trekking to Kabetogama Lake in Voyageurs National Park at the border of Minnesota and Canada. My body seemed to blend in with the lush forest. It was this first connection with my surroundings that sparked my interest in nature and showed me the embodiment of my soul in the purest of forms.

My focus shifted from the teeming vegetation in front of me to the melodious noise of the waves, sounding just as a sleeping giant would, breathing in and out of his nose. To the left
of me was a cross between a mountain and a hill. It was completely made up of bedrock and stood as tall as a ten-story building. Someone shouted, “Hey, let’s get to the top!”

So there I was, standing barefoot at the base of what resembled an authentic version of a Bass Pro Shops nature exhibit. Roots of indigenous trees snaked across the bare bedrock surface of the hill, creating veins that added to the aesthetic of the island. Green, flowering moss tainted the shaded areas of the hill as well as the crumbly, sun-dried moss that lay on parts of the hill that weren’t shaded. I began trembling as a cloud of nervousness enveloped me.

“Shouldn’t we grab some hiking boots to climb this?” I asked. “This incline is pretty steep. What if I step on the moss? Doesn’t it carry some harmful bacteria? What if a snake bites my foot?”

“Relax, dude,” urged Riley, another friend of mine. “We will hike this barefoot. Besides, it’ll actually feel much better than shoes will on your feet.”

After a moment of debating my worries, I made my way toward the bottom of the hill, stepping into grass that rose above my waist. I eyed every step I took, observing the areas around my feet for any hungry animal that might take a bite out of my flesh. Once I reached the bottom of the hill, I grabbed a tree with its roots clinging to the visible bedrock and swung my body onto the steep rock’s surface. I marched up the hill with the soles of my feet stinging with each step I took due to the immense heat put on the rock by the emblazoning sunlight. As soon as I reached the peak, I took a moment to catch my breath. I closed my eyes and tilted my head toward the sky to let the volcanic power of the sun overtake my skin. The wind, spitting at my face and tugging at my hair and shirt, evened out the temperature and allowed the freshest of air to enter my lungs. The magnificent aroma of baking pine needles in the sun engulfed my
nostrils, just as a mother would wrap her child in her love. In an instant, I was overcome by a feeling of harmony, as if the air I breathed contained a shaman’s curing potion or the sun’s rays were Cupid’s arrows. I seemed to have entered a meditative trance, being relieved of all possible woes. I opened my eyes, revealing the most spectacular view of the surrounding islands and lake. The lake stretched for miles, with collections of islands dotting the landscape and no mainland in sight. I bit my lip thinking to myself, “is this what heaven looks like?” The euphony of silence, or lack thereof, had never sounded so brilliant: the shimmer of tree leaves and branches mixed with the faded crashing waves, the birds calling in the distance, the wind’s whisperings of secrets in my ears, as the flora and the fauna connected as one. Suddenly, I was pleasantly awakened from my trance by the sound of Ryan’s mother’s voice.

“Hey Ethan, look over there. You see all those branches bunched up? That’s a bald eagle’s nest.”

At close to eye level, I saw what appeared to be a pterodactyl's lair. I was astonished at the size and perfectness of the bald eagle’s home. Very faintly, I could hear the begging calls of juveniles in the nest. And then, almost instantly, a female bald eagle soared over my head with its wings outstretched and disappeared over the walls of the nest. I let out a gasp. I had never once seen America’s bird of prey before. I was amazed at the detail and sharpness of the eagle’s face and feathers. And the wingspan, oh the wingspan! It had to have been over 7 feet across. In that very instant, I was encased by an odd sense of protection and a connection to the first explorers of the region. Visions of fur-trading pioneers and settlers on the island with signal smoke from nearby Ojibwe villages filled my imagination. I imagined myself as a Native American, scavenging the island for the sole purpose of new discovery and exploration of an
unfamiliar land. I wandered over to where Ryan and Riley were situated, both sitting cross-legged. They had discovered a cliff on the side of the hill. It was covered in green moss and shaded by a crooked tree, basically on its side. They were lounging in the pit of moss while indulging on nectarous wild raspberries found on a bush beside the moss. I decided to join in, which fed my imagination of the exploring native even further. The moss tickled the bottoms of my feet and left a slight stickiness to my heels. The sensation on my feet felt similar to that of walking on a floor made of feathers. After all, moss is nature’s carpet. We watched Ryan’s dog, Max, dash around the bare side of the hill, while relaxing in the shade, running our extremities through the moss, and munching on wild raspberries. Max looked like a free spirit, playing with his own imagination. I saw my own soul through Max, dancing around like a lottery winner. In that moment, I was one with nature.

When it was time to say goodbye to the island, I took it all in one last time: the baking pine, the whispering wind, the kissing of the sun, and the orchestral music of the wildlife. I looked to the sky as I was getting in the boat and saw two more bald eagles painting the sky with their beauty. A tear slid down my face waving goodbye to the memories I left on the peak of Bald Eagle Island. I had just lived the most beautifully immense moments of my life on an archipelago deep within the North Woods. In doing so, nature revealed itself as powerful and personal, yielding the interstellar and celestial travel through the galaxies of the mind and soul.