

## Great Northern Pike

I'd been fishing for walleye all week and kept tossing back pike, huge damn things but not such good eating, so I was told. Throwing themselves at my walleye lure as I trolled from the canoe, my twenty-dollar pole hooked under the center thwart.

So, in later afternoon, another of these giants was on my line, a big guy that ruddered the boat to the right. I let out line and reeled in, finally fought him to the gunwale and into the net. A beautiful fellow. Slick and red in the afternoon sun, just under the maximum Canadian government size for great northern pike. I decided to eat this beautiful fish.

I fastened him onto a line and let him swim out behind the canoe, dragging me a little, but the shore of the bay was coming up quickly enough. I paddled faster to get through the waves chopping higher in the afternoon wind. Soon I was pushing the bow between the broad flat rocks of the shore.

I trusted the map after all this time on Lewis Lake, the Tawatinaw River, twice under the Canadian National line, once with freight passing over, big spruce logs mostly, the Marchington and now MacDougal Bay, and I knew from the map this portage would be a long one - two miles I guessed to the falls that fell in Botsford Lake, and, God, I hoped for a path not too overgrown, not too stepped up with granite ridges. I was hopeful from the contours on the map.

I pulled up the canoe and lifted my fish from the water, big as half my leg, tired as me, maybe more, that heavy string through his gill. I lashed one pack into the boat and pulled the other onto my back. I laid the fish into the net, twisted the frame to secure him there, and shimmed the handle of the net under the pack lashed tight in the deck.

The path wasn't obvious but finally I picked it up among the spruces. I pulled my life vest out of the boat and secured it onto my shoulders. I squatted to invert the canoe, then lifted it onto the foam and canvas vest, finding the balance, heavy goddam thing. My fish hung out in front of me in the net, his gills working against the dry Canadian air.

It always takes me a few steps to stagger into some kind of rhythm for a portage, but finally, just at the treebreak and the path, my knees and hips found the angle to

keep me moving through the lower needles of the branches and into the long narrow clearing, sunlight making its way down to drive steam up from the floor of the spruce needles.

Mosquitoes lifted from the earth to hover under the boat with me, keeping pace with absolute efficiency as I trundled forward, the bow lifted slightly to reveal the next ten feet of the path. Insects hadn't bothered me out on the water; mosquitoes, black flies, no-see-ums never fan out far from the shore. Here, though, in the steam and filtered sunlight, I felt them on my knuckles and neck, even through the thick cotton of my socks, drawing out their little drams of blood.

Songbirds don't fly so far north, so it was a quiet forest, and as I entered farther I left the loon calls that had echoed across the bay. As I counted my steps to a hundred and began counting again, I tried to decide what signal – what bird call or rush of water – would alert me to the end of the path and my chance to get on the lake. I decided to keep moving, and not to stop to rest my shoulders or to apply the mosquito dope that was sunk deep in a pocket of my pack.

The path I followed, I soon understood, wasn't one of those carved out by Canadian Interior Ministry workers but by running water – a creekbed, dry now, with stones riding on silt, and roots breaking through the earth and across the shallow. And it was one of these, it must have been, a root that tripped me up and stopped me short with a simultaneous cracking of wood and bone.

I went down all at once, my elbows and chin taking most of the weight, my hands still fixed on the gunwales of the canoe. And it surprised me, just as suddenly, as I lay on the ground, that the quiet could return so quickly.

I lay there prone and panted and probably groaned, and finally found myself able to push away the canoe, flipping it up and over and turning my head to watch it rock slowly still.

No pain had come yet to my ankle, but as I pushed away from the ground with my palms and tried to bring my knees up under me, the foot felt somehow loose, unhinged. Still I managed to work myself around and to sit up. I looked for branches that might have fallen nearby to help me up and maybe to walk. The afternoon mist stayed low to the ground, with mosquitoes like little lights floating in and out of the sun.

Before long, a slapping came from the fiberglass inside the canoe, and I crawled over to my fish, who was fighting the net and the dryness of his gills. Mosquitoes were landing all along his big body, and I waved them out of his eye.

We'll get there, my beautiful fellow, I said, reaching for the net. We'll get there soon. His gill opened and closed like a flower.